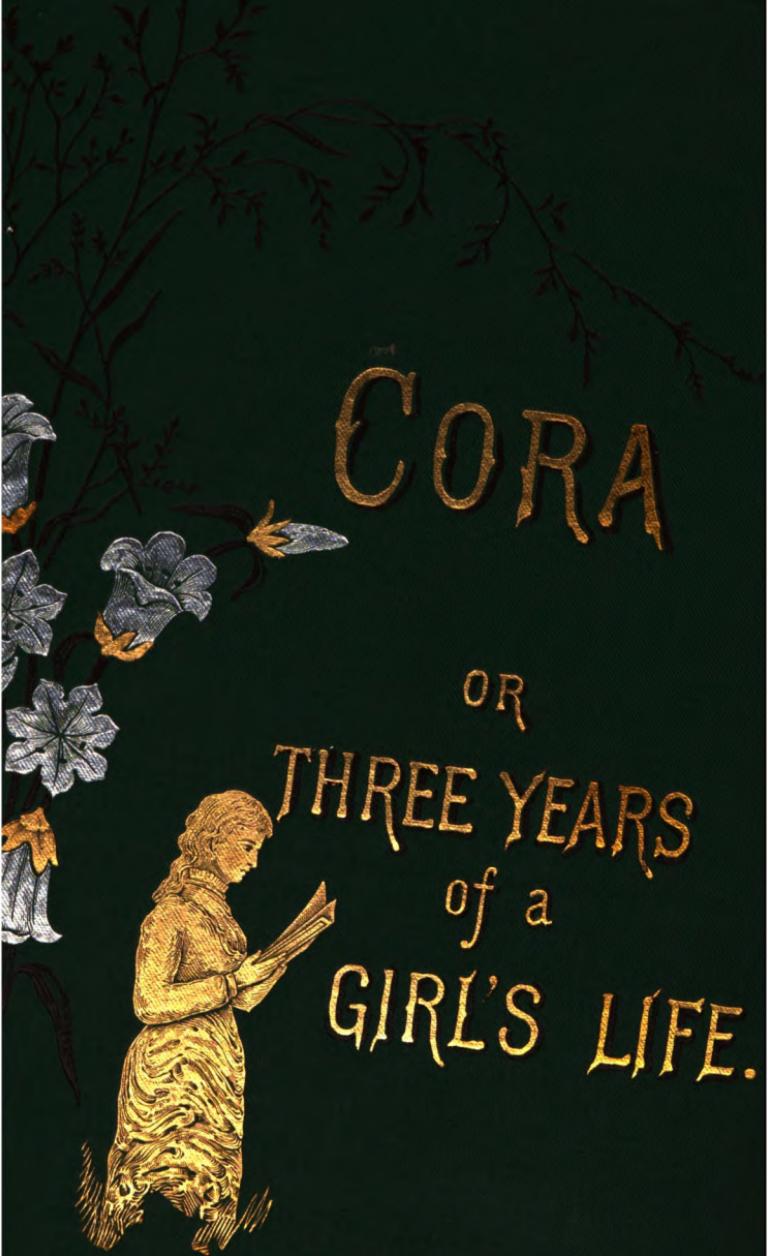

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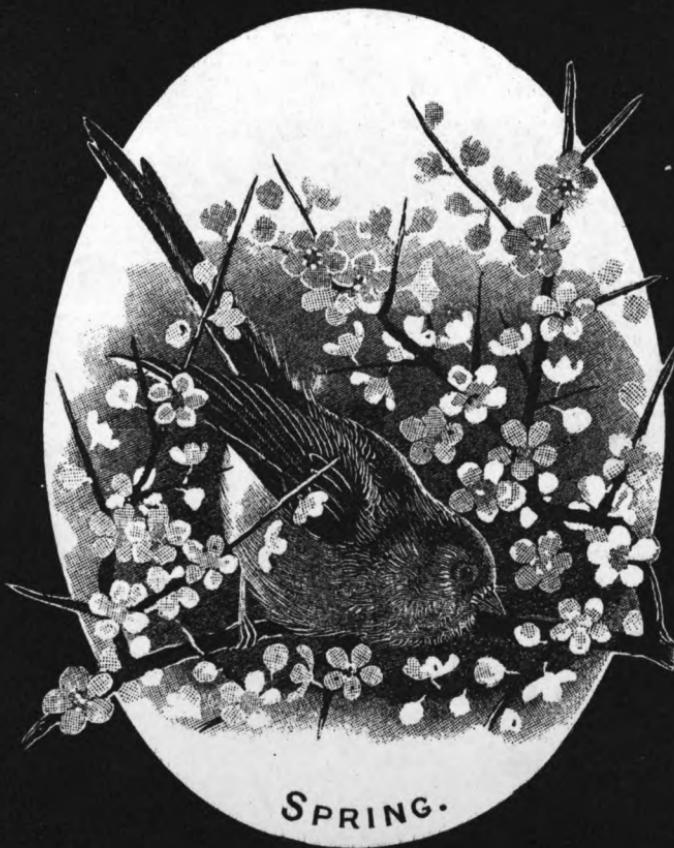




CORA

OR

THREE YEARS
of a
GIRL'S LIFE.

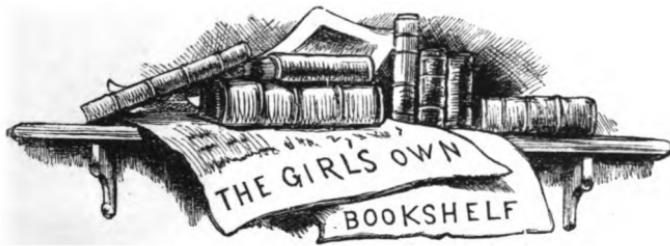




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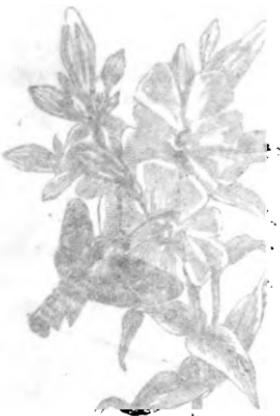




"ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE OLD HOME."

COOK'S

THREE LEAVES OF THE COOK'S PLANT.



"THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER" (No. 1).

66, FARRINGTON ROAD, LIVERPOOL, E.C.



"ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE OLD HOME."

CORA;

OR,

THREE YEARS OF A GIRL'S LIFE.



“THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER” OFFICE,
56, PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON, E.C.

251. q. 476.

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Dedicated

To the readers of

"THE GIRL'S OWN PAPER,"

With the best wishes of the Author,

M. M. POLLARD.



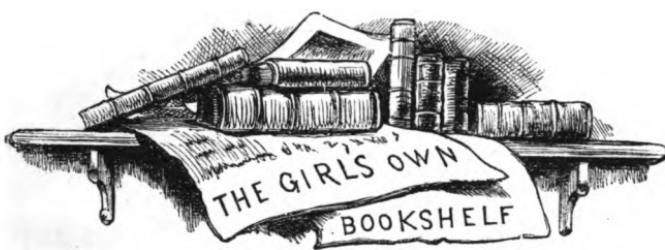
SPRING.



SUMMER.



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"ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE OLD HOME."

ODORAT

1811

THREE LEAVES OF GOLDEN THYME.



THYME

CITRATED

LEAVES

OF GOLDEN

THYME.—THE GOLDEN THYME.—*Thymus citriodorus*.

BY JAMES OSBURN, R.W. LONDON, E.C.



BY THE CEMETERY.

CORA;
OR,
THREE YEARS OF A GIRL'S LIFE.



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CORA;

OR,

THREE YEARS OF A GIRL'S LIFE.

CHAPTER I.

A SKETCH ON THE SEA-SHORE.

A LONG procession of schoolgirls was winding slowly along the streets of the quaint old town of Westville one afternoon in the last week of July. They walked with even march and decorous mien past the tempting windows of the shops and past the holiday loungers who had just arrived by an excursion train, and were doing their best to make the most of their "five hours by the seaside." Miss Winifred Lewis, sister to the principal of the school, and the French governess walked in the rear of the procession.

On the girls went, lighting up the dark, sombre streets of the old town as with a dream of youth and beauty, their faces bright and happy, their gay parasols and their many-tinted summer dresses forming some pleasant bits of colouring in the

glaring sunshine. They passed up a long, shaded lane, where the hedges were wreathed with honeysuckle, went round by Westville Church, through the allotment gardens, and then came to Greystone Common, which lay beyond the usual haunts of holiday people, and where passers-by were few.

Miss Winifred Lewis stopped suddenly, and, in a clear, rather shrill voice pronounced the magic word, "Disperse."

Not that she meant her flock to vanish away like the thin, gauzy, white clouds that were at the moment stalking slowly across the sky and losing themselves in the bright azure. But "disperse" was a favourite word of hers, and meant that her pupils were at liberty to break the ranks and wander about where they would, so that they kept within a certain limit.

What a hubbub of voices there was ! What busy excitement, as the five-and-twenty schoolgirls found themselves suddenly free from restraint—allowed to talk English, and permitted to disport themselves as they pleased during the brief time of recreation. They formed themselves into select groups, choosing the companions they liked best; they wandered across the common and down on the sands, talking with even more than usual vivacity.

For was there not much to discuss? It was the last day of term at Westville Ladies' College. By that hour to-morrow the pupils would be scattered far and wide, some on their way to their own homes, some already arrived at the end of their journey. And so confidences were exchanged, bright antici-

pations, full of hope, and plans of coming enjoyment were talked over. With the usual warmth and demonstrativeness of schoolgirl friendship, promises were made of letters to be written, photographs to be sent, visits to be paid, and injunctions to be remembered.

Had they not all been so occupied they might have noticed one girl who wandered slowly away from the rest. She went down a short, winding descent to the beach, picked her way over a range of craggy, shelving rocks, and seated herself on a narrow ridge near the sea.

She was beyond the sight of her companions now, and for a few minutes she kept her eyes steadily fixed on the waters, where the tiny ripples were dancing in the sunlight.

But soon the prospect became indistinct—hot, blinding tears welled into her eyes, which she dashed impatiently aside.

"How foolish, to be sure! I came here to paint, not to cry. Cora Forest, you are *not* to give way—I insist!" exclaimed she, addressing herself, with a petulant air, and she hastily drew from her pocket a small artist's colour-box and a drawing-book. She opened the latter at a blank page, and looked round for something to copy.

At the opposite side of the bay was a yacht, the white sails of which were all spread, but they hung limp and drooping in the calm air; a little red and white flag over the stern nodded lazily at its reflection in the water, and two men with red caps on were seated in the bow of the craft. Behind, as a

background, was a high point of land that stretched far out into the bay, forming, in fact, its boundary on that side. This point was thickly wooded with fir trees, even to the summit, where their tops caught the sunshine, and made an uneven, fringed outline against the blue sky.

Cora choked back her tears, and, with vigorous touches, began to sketch the yacht and its surroundings, and while doing this one might see she made a charming picture herself, perched there in the shadow of the bluff headland.

She had dark brown hair, brown eyes, large, and full of expression; a pretty mouth; firm, decided lips; white, even teeth, and a *petite* slim figure. A brunette beauty she would perhaps become some of these days, but at present she was too pale, too sickly-looking, too unformed for such a distinction.

Her dress was as simple as possible; nothing could be plainer than the round hat, trimmed with brown ribbon; the russet-coloured dress, short, and without flounces; the black jacket, that seemed sadly too small and shabby.

Cora had nearly finished sketching her picture when she heard some one calling her name loudly, and presently Nesta Burges came scrambling over the rocks, flushed and out of breath.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Cora!"

"What do you want with me?" asked the girl, without lifting her eyes from the paper.

"Of course I want you for lots of things! Why did you creep away here, like the little mouse you are? And I declare you have been crying—

"WHAT ARE YOU PAINTING?"



there's a tear on your cheek ! What are you painting?"

Cora did not reply, but she held up her painting for Nesta's scrutiny.

"How lovely it is ! The yacht looks asleep in the sunshine, and the shadows round it in the still water are splendid ! Cora, you must give me that painting to take home with me for a keepsake, and I shall call it 'A Study done in Tears.' Tell me, why have you been crying ?"

"Because I am discontented, and foolish, and impatient."

"Have you heard from your father ?"

"Yes ; a letter came to Mrs. Woodhouse this morning."

"What did he say ?"

"He does not want me ; no, he does not want me home."

Her lip trembled, and hot tears started again to her eyes, as she replied.

In a moment Nesta's arms were impetuously flung round Cora's neck, to the sore risk of damage to her picture and wet paints.

"You dear, lonely, miserable darling ! How sorry I am for you to have to spend all the holidays with Mrs. Woodhouse and Miss Winifred Lewis ! It will be like being banished to a desert island, away from all fun and enjoyment. I almost feel ashamed of being so glad and happy to be going home. Your father must be the horridest, awfulest——"

"Hush, Nesta ! you must not talk like that. If anyone is to be blamed, it is I, for being so impatient

and discontented. My father, for reasons of his own, wishes me to remain all my holidays at Westville Ladies' College, he says, and you know I cannot stay much longer at school, for I am just eighteen now; there must be an end to it some day."

"Of course there must, Cora. I never heard of anyone being kept at school after they were nineteen. But in the meantime it is dreadful for you, poor pet! Every one of the girls is going away, this vacation, I believe?"

"Yes, they are all going. Even the Indian girls, the Jessops, have found out an aunt in England; and they are invited to stay with her."

"Cora, it makes me shudder to think how lonely you will be! I shall reproach myself for being lively and 'jolly' every time I think of you. Sometimes I shall picture you all by yourself in that great, bare schoolroom, or, worse still, sitting doing company manners in that prim, chill, starched drawing-room, where everything is so neat, and stiff, and proper."

"I mean to work very hard, then I shan't so much mind it," replied Cora, dolefully.

"Of course you do, and you'll kill yourself with study. Every way I look at it, it seems worse and worse. *Cela fait frémir.* You will be slaving while I am playing. I cannot imagine such a hard life!"

"You cannot at all imagine a life like mine is, Nesta. Though I have been eighteen years in the world I have never yet learned what 'home' means. I have always been amongst strangers or at school, so why should I murmur now?"

"*C'est effroyable!* Oh, dear! how that horrid French does get into one's teeth! I cannot get rid of it. One comfort, I shan't have to speak a word but pure English all the time I am at home."

"I hope it will be '*pure English*,' Nesta, and no 'slang,'" said Cora, looking up, with the ghost of a smile on her lip.

"I won't make any rash promise about the 'slang,'" for it's as bad as French, and just comes out when one doesn't expect it. I lost three marks yesterday, for Miss Winifred overheard me say Herr Zilner was in an 'awful wax' because I had done my German translation badly. But I am glad to see you smile, Cora; it gives me courage to mention a thought that has been running wild in my brain ever since I sat down on this rock."

"What thought is that?"

"How should you like to come down to stay at Marleigh Grange?"

"At your home? I should like it very much."

"Then I will ask mamma to invite you there, and you know she hardly ever refuses me anything."

"I don't suppose I could go, Nesta," replied the girl, with a sigh.

"Why not?"

"My father might not give his consent, so please don't talk any more about it—at least, not about the invitation, though I like to hear about Marleigh Grange."

"I had a lot of photographs sent me to-day," said Nesta, producing a bundle of cards. "Here is a view of the dear old house; the windows of the

drawing-room open on the lawn, you see ; and here is mamma's likeness—she is the dearest, sweetest mother in the world. Here is papa's—exactly like him, even to the wart on his eyebrow, and the funny little curl in his whisker. This is Olive's photo—my eldest sister, you know ; she is called handsome, and is almost, if not *quite*, engaged to Captain Rollo Fraser. These are my two brothers. Ralph, the eldest, is at Cambridge, and Fred, darling Fred, is a Woolwich cadet ; look at his uniform ; he is such fun, and keeps us all alive when he is at home ; and this is Ponto, the great shaggy house dog ; and here is Pritz, the little terrier. Now you have seen the whole royal family, just as we shall be, all together, this vacation, and I wish you were going to be one of us."

"Hush, Nesta, hush ! that part of the subject is forbidden," exclaimed Cora, who had been carefully examining each photograph during Nesta's running commentary.

"I shall often think of you, dear, and hope you will enjoy yourself very much indeed," she added, gravely.

"But I shall not forget my promise all the same, though I must not talk about it," retorted Nesta, with a laugh.

She packed up her photographs, and sat watching Cora's nimble fingers as she put some finishing touches to her little sketch.

Nesta Burges, though fully twelve months younger, was a couple of inches taller than Cora Forest. She was altogether of larger, less ethereal make, from

her round dimpled chin to her large white hands and substantial waist. Her hair was a pale, sunny brown, her eyes bright blue, her cheeks pink as a hedge rose, her laugh the very symbol of merriment and good humour.

No bookworm was Nesta in her heart, and very many were the blunders she made, numberless were the scrapes into which she fell, during her school experience. But, with all her faults, she was a general favourite, for her mirth was without malice, and her blunders sprang from sheer carelessness, not from stupidity.

"There is the recall bugle, or, in other words, Lydia Jessop is waving her pocket handkerchief and shouting at us like anything, which means that Winifred and the French governess are tired of their dainty little promenade over the grassy sward—they have been talking German the whole time, I am certain—and they want us to 'steer our barks' homeward," exclaimed Nesta, jumping up from the rock.

"I have finished my painting, so here is your keepsake, Nesta; I wish it were more worthy your acceptance," said Cora, as she presented it.

A warm kiss was the reply; and the two school-girls scrambled over the rocks, and reached the others in time to join the procession that was forming just on the edge of the common.

CHAPTER II.

WITHIN SCHOOL WALLS.

THE next day all was confusion at Westville Ladies' College. From the first peep of dawn the servants were up, preparing early breakfasts, cording boxes, and carrying them downstairs into the hall. There was a sound of talking and laughing in all the bedrooms, the usual restraint was set aside, and on breaking-up day no laws of strict silence were enforced.

Mrs. Woodhouse, the lady principal of the school —a tall, grand-looking woman, with a resolute, handsome face, keen black eyes, and a manner that seemed formed to rule, to influence, and to educate—went about among her young charges, giving them directions about their travelling, adding little bits of advice, little words of kindness, and many messages for their dear ones at home.

She always sent the girls away from Westville College with smiles on their faces, and words of regret at parting on their lips, for they all liked Mrs. Woodhouse, and from the best scholar there, to the

greatest dunce, were ready to confess, whatever might be their own faults, the principal was always in the right.

She had been a governess in her early youth, then had married the man she loved, and enjoyed a bright, brief space of happiness. But when her husband died, leaving her almost as poor as she was before marriage, she resumed teaching again, and after much striving, and battling down many difficulties, at last found herself the head of a flourishing school.

It was Mrs. Woodhouse's lot on this day to take the Indian girls—the Jessops—to their aunt in the North of England, for they were as timid, and nearly as ignorant, as babes about railway travelling.

Their father, an officer in India, had sent them to England to be educated, and the poor pale-faced girls, with their great staring eyes, seemed to be always looking round with amazement at seeing everything so different from what they had been accustomed in their little world in the East.

"Come, girls, you must make a good breakfast, for we have many miles to travel to-day, and shall need all our energies," said Mrs. Woodhouse, cheerily, as she took her place behind the tea-pot, at the head of the table.

"I am glad you will be with us some part of your journey, Nesta. You won't mind travelling alone the rest of the way, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, Mrs. Woodhouse, I don't mind the train in the least; and either papa or Ralph or Fred will be sure to meet me at the railway station."

"How is your mamma now?"

"Very delicate. She is always rather an invalid."

"So I understand, and I am sorry to hear it. It must be a trial to be laid aside, just when her blooming young family is around her claiming her attention. Is your sister Olive to be married this summer?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Woodhouse. She has not told me," replied Nesta, smiling and blushing brightly.

"Well, she must let me know in due time, that I may send her my usual present to my old pupils—a family Bible. Let me see. I have sent three away already this year, and, in all, quite a dozen! I know of no better gift to a young bride. If she makes the teaching of *that* book her rule of life, she will steer clear of the quicksands and shallows, but if she does *not*, one shudders to think of the result. God, in His grace, keep you, dear children, from such a fate!"

Mrs. Woodhouse spoke so earnestly, so feelingly, that all the girls seemed touched, none of them attempted to reply, and, for a minute, they ate their bread-and-butter and drank their tea in silence.

"We must not linger too long over our breakfast," said Mrs. Woodhouse, presently. "Have you much to do, Nesta?"

"Only to tie up my sandwiches and put on my hat."

"That will not take you long, I hope. There is the cab driving to the gate, and in ten minutes the train starts."

Nesta found time to give Cora Forest a passionate embrace, and exclaim, in her impulsive way—

"Good-bye, a thousand times, my pet! I shan't forget my promise, and you will hear from me in a day or two."

Cora shook her head a little sadly. She could not see hope in the rose-tinted light in which Nesta Burges beheld it. Indeed, there were many reasons why she should be disappointed in the present case, and why her visit to Marleigh Grange should not take place.

Mrs. Burges, in her delicate state of health, might justly hesitate to receive a stranger into her family, and even were that obstacle removed, Cora's father might object to her going. So she promptly and resolutely set all hope aside, and determined to think no more of the subject than she could help.

It was rather dreary work watching the cabs drive away one after another, with their burdens of girls, boxes, and portmanteaus, rather trying to listen to words of sympathy, pity, and condolence as each of her schoolfellows considerately checked her wild raptures for a moment to say "Good-bye" to Cora.

Nellie Simpson was the last to leave. She was a curly-haired little girl, the youngest pupil in the school, an affectionate child, who nearly upset Cora's forced stoicism altogether by clinging round her neck, showering kisses on her cheeks and hands from her rosebud lips, and exclaiming, with tearful eyes—

"Dear, dear Cora! It's breaking my heart to leave you all alone here by yourself!"

Miss Winifred was to take Nellie to the railway station to place her in the charge of her father, who would be travelling in the same train, *en route* from

London to his home, and who promised to pick up his daughter by the way.

Cora looked out of the window as Miss Winifred walked majestically up the street, leading Nellie by the hand, and watched them until they were out of sight.

Miss Lewis had very pronounced ideas about dress, and often used the words "aesthetic" and "classical" when she gave her opinions of what things ought to be. The result in her case was that she never looked like anybody else. She clad her long, thin person in trailing robes, without flounces or fringes; she wore the most marvellous combination of colours, and had her garments made from patterns that were altogether unique and uncommon.

Another strong feeling of hers was fondness for all that was German. She would fain have had the schoolgirls converse in that language six days in the week, instead of the two days to which Mrs. Woodhouse restricted it. She loved German literature and German poetry, and some of her pupils were malicious enough to say all this was for the sake of Herr Zillner, the German master.

Be this as it may, Miss Winifred was presently seen returning from the station with the little German professor on one side of her, and his sister, Bertha Zillner, on the other.

The latter was governess in an English family, and had just arrived to spend the holidays with her brother. There was much voluble talking and gay laughter as the trio came up the street. Herr Zillner, half a head shorter than Miss Winifred, looked up in her face with eyes expressive of devoted

admiration, and Cora came away from the window, lest they should see her and think she was acting the spy.

She heard them enter the house, go up to the drawing-room for a few minutes, then they all went out again, passing up the street in a little tumult of gay animation.

The house grew very quiet after this. Some of the servants were gone out on leave for the evening, the others were downstairs enjoying themselves or resting after their early rising.

Cora tried hard to find employment that would keep her from feeling lonely. She translated some pages of Italian poetry, and read until her eyes grew weary, wondering very much all the time whether anyone would think of her and bring her some tea. But the hours passed away. The setting sun lit up the room with a gorgeous display of prismatic colours ; then the twilight came on, and faded into darkness.

Had Cora been less utterly cast down, less morbid, she would doubtless have rung for the servants, and have made her presence known, her wants remembered ; but she had not the heart to do anything of the sort. The idea of her being forgotten, left alone to solitude, darkness, and hunger, was the "last straw," the "finishing stroke," that put an end to all her resolves of firmness and composure.

She leaned her arms on the hard table, rested her face on them, and sobbed as though her heart would break—sobbed until sleep came to the rescue ; the white lids drooped over her tearful eyes, and her troubles were hushed in sweet forgetfulness.

By-and-by Miss Winifred came into the school-room, like a whirlwind, with a bedroom candlestick in her hand and a servant at her heels.

"Why, here is Miss Forest ! and I declare she is asleep on the table. Cora, Cora, rouse yourself, my dear ! It is very late, past eleven o'clock. Are you ready for bed ? "

The girl woke up shivering, and with a sense of pain at her heart, as she looked round inquiringly.

"I never knew Miss Forest was in the house at all, ma'am. I thought she were gone out with you, and the poor young lady haven't had no tea, and no supper," said the servant.

"Oh, what a shame ! What will Mrs. Woodhouse say when she hears about this to-morrow ? Run down, Lucy, and get some cocoa ready at once, and toast a slice of bread. Poor Miss Forest must be faint with hunger."

The servant disappeared, and then Miss Winifred laid her hand on Cora's arm, and said, in an excited tone—

"Never was I so startled in my life as when I looked into your bed and found you were not there ! There has been nothing but mistakes all through ! Lucy thought you were with me, and I thought—well, to tell you the truth, I never thought about you at all. I went to tea at Herr Zillner's lodgings with his sister Bertha, and they both had so much to talk about, and were so lively, and sang such pretty German duets, that the time fled rapidly. It never came into my head that you were here alone, neglected, and half-starved. You look quite ill,



"“WHY, HERE IS MISS FOREST!””



"HER TROUBLES WERE HUSHED IN SWEET FORGETFULNESS."

child! Forgive me my part in the blunder—will you?"

A kind word was like balm and honey to Cora's sensitive heart; the ready smile was on her lip, the hand out-stretched in a moment, and Miss Winifred for the first time in her life drew the girl towards her and pressed a warm kiss on her lips.

Cora took her cocoa and toast and tried hard to think she was enjoying the repast. Miss Winifred seated herself beside her on the form, and began recounting some of the songs she had heard that evening.

"Herr Zillner has a splendid baritone voice," said Cora, when she could get in a word.

"Yes, my dear, and he knows how to manage it to perfection. It is a great treat to hear him sing."

"Which does he excel in most—singing or painting?"

"Really, Cora, I could not say. The Germans are so clever that they excel in almost everything."

It was pleasant to talk to Miss Winifred now she had put off her precise, schoolroom manner, and would even condescend to gossip. She grew animated with her subject—a full, deep colour swept up and brightened in her cheeks; and Cora wondered she had never before thought Miss Lewis handsome. Yes, even at thirty-seven, "quite handsome."

So passed the first day of Cora Forest's vacation and the next morning Miss Winifred laughingly turned her out of the schoolroom, locked the door, and took her up to a little apartment called "Mrs. Woodhouse's *boudoir*."

"Make yourself at home here, Cora, and, if you want books, take down some of these from the shelves. I can't have you poring over school lessons for ever, child. 'Screw not the cord too sharply, lest it snap.' You must have a thorough change of occupation ; and if I had not promised to spend the morning at Bertha Zillner's we would sit down and sew and read together. But Mrs. Woodhouse is coming home this afternoon, I am glad to say, and she will plan something pleasant for you, no doubt."

CHAPTER III.

AN INVITATION.

THE next morning, when Cora came down to breakfast, she found a letter beside her plate. Mrs. Woodhouse, at the head of the table, was reading another epistle, and a number of unopened envelopes were lying near her.

"You seem to have a large share of correspondence to-day," said Miss Winifred.

"Yes, I daresay most of these are from the girls to tell of their travels yesterday. This letter is from Mrs. Burges, a very kind one. She has invited you down to Marleigh Grange on a visit, Cora. Should you like to go there?"

"Very much indeed," was the reply, as a warm glow rose to the girl's cheeks.

"Your letter is from Nesta, I suppose? It was enclosed in mine. Does she wish to have you with her?"

"Oh, yes, her letter is full of it," replied Cora, laughing.



"SHE FOUND A LETTER BESIDE HER PLATE."

"Then I will write to London to your father, and ask his permission. You had better add a few lines, expressing your wish to accept the invitation."

The reply from Mr. Forest came in due course —a few lines to Mrs. Woodhouse, not a word to Cora.

He had no objection to his daughter going to Marleigh Grange, as she seemed to wish it so much, and would Mrs. Woodhouse give her the money necessary for her expenses, and charge it in the bill?

Mrs. Woodhouse read the letter aloud to Cora, and saw the blank look of astonishment pass over her face.

"I was sure father would have written to me, also!"

"Well, yes, I can quite fancy your expecting he would do so, but I suppose he did not think of it, or had not time, or something."

"He writes to me so seldom, that he cannot know how much I value his letters."

"You see, Cora, some men dislike letter-writing very much. They are not like you and me, who might scribble page after page, and yet write little worth reading; they must have business or something important to say, and your father, in this case, has given full instructions in his letter to me," said Mrs. Woodhouse, cheerily, though she was herself vexed and disappointed at Mr. Forest's curt reply, and at his utterly ignoring his daughter's epistle.

Many things about Mr. Forest puzzled her.

His daughter had been at Westville Ladies' College for nine years, and yet her father remained as much a stranger as ever. He occasionally made short, hurried visits, impressed on Mrs. Woodhouse his desire that Cora should have the advantages of the highest education she could give, and he had brief formal interviews with his daughter.

But as to really understanding the man, his character, his habits, his means, Mrs. Woodhouse often told Miss Winifred that there her powers of discernment altogether failed.

True, Mr. Forest never seemed to grudge money spent in education, and he punctually paid every bill sent to him; but he had asked Mrs. Woodhouse to superintend Cora's dress, and while doing so had laid

such stress on his horror of finery, his hatred of vanity, sham, and the like, that she had taken his hints to mean that he wished his daughter to be clad in the plainest garments, the most sombre and serviceable that could be procured.

Mrs. Woodhouse had her own theories on this subject. She believed Mr. Forest was a needy man—that it was by great struggle and intense self-denial he procured the education for Cora that might hereafter fit her to win her way in the world. She took an interest in him on this account, and ceased to wonder why he wore such rusty coats, why there was such a careworn look in his face, and why his large brown eyes had so melancholy an expression.

But now Cora was going away on a visit, Mrs. Woodhouse held a review on the dingy dresses, and regarded them with some degree of discomfiture.

"You have nothing very smart to wear, Cora. Had there been sufficient notice, I would have got you a new dress."

"Oh! never mind about that, Mrs. Woodhouse. There are my grey home-spun and my black alpaca, and the drab lustre I had made in the spring—surely they will be quite enough variety."

"Enough for outdoor wear, perhaps; but there are no light, pretty summer materials such as you will see on other girls. However, I will buy you a hat, some gloves, and ribbons."

"Thank you, so much. And now, please tell me what school books I shall take with me."

"Not a single one. I interdict them all, for I



"'YOU WILL NOT FORGET MY WORDS, WILL YOU, CORA?'"

want you to enjoy yourself as much as possible—to forget school trammels for awhile, and to have a spirit and will of your own. It will be your first glimpse of the world, and you will see and hear of things very different from what you have been accustomed while under this roof. And you may meet with various sorts of people, some all that could be wished, some very much the reverse. Use your discernment and avoid the latter. I do not ask you to be dull or gloomy, but I do ask you to be true, unselfish, God-fearing. You will not forget my words, will you, Cora?"

Mrs. Woodhouse spoke in the tenderly impassioned way peculiar to her when giving her pupils advice, and that, doubtless, added much force to her remarks.

"I will not forget. But, oh, Mrs. Woodhouse, you make me feel as though I was taking leave of school altogether," exclaimed Cora, much moved, but without the slightest suspicion that her presentiment was a true one.

"Do I? I should be sorry to lose you yet awhile, Cora. But your going away on a visit is quite an unprecedented event. I am glad you have the chance, for several reasons. One is, that I think it time for you to have a peep beyond school walls. Another reason is, that Westville College is to be put into the hands of workmen. I am going to have the whole place painted and papered, and you would have grown very sick of turpentine and varnish."

"Shall you not leave home, Mrs. Woodhouse?"

"No, my place is here; for my sister has decided

on going to London with Bertha Zillner." The last part of the sentence came out hesitatingly, and with a suppressed little sigh.

Cora, quick to interpret Mrs. Woodhouse's meaning, understood at once that Miss Winifred had decided to marry the German master, and that her sister was trying to bear patiently the prospect of an event she regretted, but had no power to prevent.

CHAPTER IV.

BEYOND SCHOOL WALLS.

IT was a splendid morning. The golden sunshine shone upon all things—upon the bright sea that lapped the yellow sands of Westville, upon the fruit-laden orchards, the white-walled cottages, the snug farm homesteads, and upon tree and flower, as Cora Forest travelled on, fast as the northern train could take her.

Now it dashed through woods, on the further side of which she still saw the blue waters shining through every break in the foliage—then on, deeper and deeper, into the heart of the country, where there was no longer a glimpse of the sea obtainable.

Cora enjoyed the novelty of the journey, and watched every change of scene with the avidity of a fresh experience. The world had never seemed so beautiful to her before.

More than once she mentally decided that, as she was not to go home to her father, there was no place

in England she would visit rather than Marleigh Grange.

She drew forth a locket that was suspended round her neck by a thin black cord. The locket had been given her by one of the schoolgirls on her birthday, and it contained the likeness of her father—an old photograph taken eight or ten years ago, when he was much younger, but it was her only parent, as she liked to think of him, far more natural, far more familiar to her eyes than the grey, haggard man who sometimes held an interview with her in Mrs. Woodhouse's chill drawing-room.

As all the other passengers had left the carriage, she pressed the likeness to her lips.

"Oh, my dear father! always looking at me with those sad, sad eyes of yours, and, with that mute appeal, asking me to love you. I *do* love you, my darling! and I would rather be going to stay with you in a log hut in the wilds of Australia, or in a kraal amongst the mealie fields of Southern Africa, than be going to live in a palace without you," she soliloquised. And then the train came into the station with a shrill whistle and a bang, and she had to put away her locket and gather up her parasol and luncheon basket.

She looked eagerly up and down the railway station, and presently saw Nesta Burges peering into the carriages at the other end of the train. She was standing just where the sunlight fell full on her, and her long curls hung like ripples of

gold down her back. A look of dismay came over Nesta's face as no sign of her friend appeared in the carriages—then she turned and saw Cora advancing towards her. Rapturous was the meeting!

"I declare I nearly gave you up, for I thought I had looked into every compartment and could find you nowhere. I am so glad you are come. Never mind your luggage, the porter will see to that and despatch it to Marleigh. Fred is waiting for us outside."

Just before the entrance gate was drawn up a low pony carriage, and by its side stood a youth, dressed in a light tweed suit and white straw hat. He held the reins in one hand, a silver-headed whip in the other, and near him were two dogs, which Cora at once recognised as Ponto and Pritz. The youth was about eighteen, and, like the rest of his family, was tall. He was slightly built, had a pleasant face, not perhaps strictly handsome, merry blue eyes, and hair nearly as light as Nesta's.

"This is my brother Fred. Cora, let me introduce you."

"You do me great honour," said Fred, with a grave face and with a profound bow.

"Don't be stupid, but help Cora into the carriage," retorted Nesta, with a laugh.

It was a lovely afternoon as they set out for their two miles' drive to Marleigh. The harvest fields around were all ready for reaping—rich wheat, bristling barley, and fluttering oats, alike golden, in a superabundant crop; and all the farm folks were

busy with machines and sickles, trying to get their stacks safely built up while the sky was unclouded.

Cora was on the front seat beside Fred, Nesta was behind, and she leaned forward to talk to her friend, asking a dozen questions about school affairs, Herr Zillner, and Miss Winifred; so that the girls had all the conversation to themselves. Presently, as they were passing through a shaded lane, with the trees nearly meeting over their heads, Fred flicked his whip at the pony's ears, and the animal darted on at a gallop for a hundred yards or so, as though he had been stung.

"You did that on purpose, Fred! You know poor Sultan never can bear to feel the whip on his ears," cried Nesta.

"I plead guilty, but I had a purpose in view."

"To frighten us both, I suppose?"

"No, to create a diversion, to change the current of your volubility. You don't give *me* the chance of putting in a word, and you know my young mind needs the vigorous influence of improving conversation."

"All right, talk away, then," said Nesta, laughing.

"I want to ask Miss Forest her opinion of Greek plays—tragedies, of course, I mean."

"I don't know Greek," replied Cora.

"Beg pardon. You know Latin, I suppose?"

"A little; nearly all our first-class girls learn Latin."

"First-class girls! Oh, yes! There's a passage

in Dante that is puzzling my brain, perhaps you can set me clear about it. This is the way it begins—

‘Our journey was not slackened by our talk,
Nor yet our talk by journeying. Still we spake
And urged our travel stoutly, like a ship—’

What comes next? Can you help me?’

“Like a ship
When the wind sits astern . . .”

finished Cora.

“Thanks, so much! Can you do it in Italian also?”

“Certainly not from memory.”

“Oh, indeed! Now for Euclid. I need not ask you if you understand Euclid; I take it as a matter of course. Will you help me with some of the propositions in the first six books while you are at Marleigh? It will make the time pass very profitably—and—and—”

This was rather too much. Cora turned round quickly, caught the sparkle in Fred's clear blue eyes, the fun and mischief lurking round his mouth, and laughed merrily—a gay silvery laugh, in which both Nesta and her brother joined.

“I'm quite ashamed of you, Fred,” exclaimed Nesta, presently.

“Well, I could not help it. Excuse me, Miss Forest, if I pushed my questioning too far; but Nesta, there, has been holding you up as a paragon of cleverness ever since it became known you were coming to visit us; and, as I hate paragons, and am

rather afraid of learned young ladies, I wanted to find out the worst at once."

"It was too bad of you. I hardly knew whether you were in jest or in earnest. What a lovely place Marleigh is!"

"You haven't seen half its beauties yet. When we get to the brow of the hill you will say the view is splendid. We can see the best part of three counties."

Fred drew up the carriage when they reached the top of the hill, and pointed out various bits worth noticing.

"There is the river, winding in and out like a silver serpent across the plain. Yonder is the tower of Marleigh Church—a fine old Norman building, which dates back before 1200. The arrow-headed windows and doorways, the zigzag patterns on some of the walls, and the heavy pillars have outlived all the processes of restoration, and I believe the church has gone through at least three modifications. Now look on the other side, and you will see Marleigh Grange—"

"Dear old place! There is not a spot in the world like it," exclaimed Nesta, with enthusiasm.

The house lay low, between two grass-clad hills, and it was a large, red brick building, rather long and rambling, perhaps. It was not of any particular style of architecture, but bore an air of extreme comfort and cosiness, as it lay sheltered by thick shrubberies. There was a large walled garden at the back, a sweeping spread of lawn before and at the sides.

Cora had seen the picture of the house, and recognised at once the front, with its many old-fashioned windows, that at the moment glowed in the slanting rays of the western sun, and the tall glass doors that opened out on the terrace of the lawn. But the photograph gave her no idea of the wealth of flowers on every side—the beds of many shapes and sizes, brilliant with crimson geraniums, with rich verbenas, with purple heliotropes, and numberless other blossoms. Yellow Noisette roses were nodding to Persian yellow, to rich Bourbons, and to fairy white Provence blooms, and the sweet perfume was wafted past on the light breeze.

Cora, who had a keen appreciation of floral beauty, would fain have lingered awhile amongst the bright display, but Nesta led her on to one of the glass doors.

" You must come inside and see mamma first ; she will quite be expecting you by this time."

Mrs. Burges was like her two youngest children, but on a smaller, paler scale. Her eyes were of a lighter azure, her hair a softer brown, her refined features wore the same pleasant expression, but were more delicate, more pensive, more languid. The gentlest, sweetest, mildest little woman in the world, she still held a firm hold on her healthy, hearty children, who would rather do anything than " offend mamma."

Mrs. Burges wore a French grey dress, with a soft, little lace shawl thrown over her shoulders ; her lace cap was also trimmed with the same pale-tinted colour. Before her, on a gipsy table, was

some muslin work, at which she had been sewing, and a pile of letters were there also ready for the post.

"So this is Cora Forest," said she, advancing to meet her guest, and pressing a kiss on her cheeks. "I have often heard of you, my dear; you are welcome to Marleigh."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Burges," said Cora, won at once, as most people were, by Mrs. Burges's kind, gentle manner.

"Where are the rest of us?" asked Fred, coming into the room and looking round.

"Your father and Ralph have not returned yet from Brixleigh; Olive is gone out to walk with Captain Fraser."

"Oh! I suppose we shall all meet at 'feeding time,' like Brown's cows," Fred suggested.

Mrs. Burges held up her finger reprovingly—

"Don't shock Miss Forest already, Fred."

"Oh, she understands me quite, for I have discovered she has rare skill in discerning character; reads me off like a book."

"Are you inclined for a run to the village? I have some letters I want posted," asked his mother.

"All right, *mater*. Nothing I should like better; it will give me an appetite for my dinner. *Au revoir*, Miss Forest," and Fred gathered up the letters and disappeared.

Mrs. Burges rang the bell, and a servant brought in a tea equipage and some cake, which she set on the gipsy table.

"Now, my dear, I will pour you out a cup of tea,

"' NOW, MY DEAR, I WILL POUR YOU OUT A CUP OF TEA.'"



it will refresh you after your journey ; and then Nesta will show you the way to your room. We don't dine until seven o'clock, for by that time our wanderers have generally all returned home, and we have their company for the rest of the evening ”

CHAPTER V.

MARLEIGH GRANGE.

WHAT a pretty room it was to which Nesta introduced her friend ! The two windows looked out on the rose-garden, backed by a dense shrubbery, and on the grass-covered hills beyond, that formed a not very distant horizon. The bed, in a deep recess, was draped with white, tied with rose-colour ; the dressing-table also showed a rosy tint under the clear muslin. On the walls were pretty water-colours, and two or three exquisite casts of figures were placed on brackets at the corners. Near one of the windows was a table on which were books and writing materials ; at the other window were two or three low chairs.

“ How lovely ! ” exclaimed Cora, glancing round the room ; then she ran to the open window, and breathed in the delicate perfume that rose on the soft breeze.

“ I shall be very near you, only the dressing-room between us, so you will not be lonely,” said Nesta.

The dressing-room did not appear as though used for its legitimate purpose, for there was a piano in it, and the large round table was strewed with books and papers and every sort of knick-knack.

"This is my own particular 'den,'" laughed Nesta; "I store all my rubbish here, and nobody troubles much if the room is not kept quite as tidy as it ought to be. You and I can come here and have a cosy chat, whenever we want to retire from the noisy world. My bedroom is just like yours, you see," said she, throwing open the inner door.

"You have a beautiful home, and you ought to be very happy, Nesta," exclaimed Cora, with unaffected admiration.

"Yes, I *am* happy; if I were not it would be my own fault. Do you know what I consider a great treat when I first arrive fresh from school?"

"Everything must be a treat."

"Yes; but my especial delight is the being able to rush about all over the house just when and where I like without asking anybody's leave. I spend almost the whole of the first day darting into rooms, from the garrets to the pantry, and everybody laughs at me, and says that I am perpetually 'cropping up' just where they don't expect to find me."

Cora was not long changing her travelling costume, and was soon ready, dressed demurely in her black alpaca, with a plain white linen collar and cuffs. Not gay, not fine by any means, but there was a warm soft glow on her cheeks, and the dark masses of her luxuriant hair were deftly plaited into glossy bands, that crowned her graceful head, and gave

what schoolgirls call a "finish" to her appearance.

She seated herself on one of the low chairs at the window, with a book in her hands, waiting until Nesta was ready to go downstairs with her.

Nesta soon arrived in a bright new dress, with violet bows and sash, and dainty lace puffings on her neck and sleeves. She had already emerged from her usual sombre school costume, and looked bright as the flowers in her waist-belt.

Nesta gave a long, scrutinising glance at Cora, and perhaps her first thought was that her friend was just a little dowdy—not, doubtless, more expensively attired than were Sarah and Phillis, the neat-handed, black-robed, white-gloved damsels, who waited every day at the Marleigh dinner-table. But her second thought was that Cora never could look anything but a true lady, and that hers was the sweetest, dearest face one could see. She pressed a fluttering little kiss on her brow, and exclaimed—

"You look very nice, my pet; and now let us hurry down, for the first gong sounded long ago."

Cora thought the drawing-room full of people when she entered, but ere long she discovered only the Burges family were present, and three strangers—the Rev. Charles McArthur and his sister Jessy, and Captain Rollo Fraser.

Mrs. Burges was still seated beside her gipsy table, her thin white hands busy with her muslin work, and leaning forward, playing with her scissors and talking earnestly, was a young man, with the Burges

face unmistakably, but his hair and eyes were darker than the family type.

Mrs. Burges pointed out a chair for Cora beside herself, and said, smilingly—

“This is my son Ralph, Miss Forest.”

No long peace was there for Cora. In a minute Nesta came over, and drew her away to be introduced to “papa.”

Squire Burges was standing near a window at the other end of the room, talking to a tall thin man with close-cropped tawny hair, a long moustache of the same colour, a ruddy, sun-browned face, and a military appearance, and he, Cora's instinct told her, must be Olive's lover, Captain Rollo Fraser.

“This is Cora Forest, papa,” said Nesta, and the portly Squire welcomed her warmly, as he said—

“You are my little daughter's favourite school friend, I understand, and that is a sure passport to our friendship also.”

There was no mistaking the hearty cordiality of his tone, and Cora, who had been feeling just a little shy and nervous, became perfectly reassured as the Squire stood looking down kindly at her, asking various questions about her journey.

Olive came into the room rather late, just a minute or two before the last gong sounded. She was handsomely dressed in rich silk, as became a bride elect, and carried herself a little grandly, as with a slightly haughty mien she walked towards Cora and held out her taper fingers, making the girl realise profoundly how wide was the gulf between herself, a mere school

chit, and this very grown up young lady, who was to be married in a couple of months.

Olive said, with a slightly superior smile—

“ I should have known you at once, Cora, though we were only a short time together at Westville House. You have grown very much indeed, and are, I think—yes, you are improved.”

At this moment the gong sounded its loud and friendly summons through the hall, and they all began to descend the broad stairs.

Fred had claimed Cora at once. Nesta went down with Mr. McArthur, the mild, pale-faced curate; and his sister Jessy, a lively-looking girl, with sharp hazel eyes, a pretty mouth, and pearly-white teeth, fell to Ralph Burges’s lot.

It was a new experience to Cora, sitting in this grand old dining-room, with the portraits of a by-gone generation of the Burges race staring down at her from their gilded frames on the walls. The table was handsomely laid out, and was bright with flowers and ferns, plate and crystal. It all seemed perfection to her, from the noiseless attendance of the well-ordered servant maids to the viands that were so well-served and tempting.

When her appetite was satisfied, Cora would rather have looked on, watching the various faces round the table, listening to snatches of conversation, and dreaming her little dreams about all she saw. But Fred claimed the most part of her attention with an insatiable perseverance. He had so many funny incidents to relate, so many adventures, personal and otherwise, to recapitulate, that it was

only now and then she could glance over at the opposite side of the table where Ralph and Miss McArthur were sitting.

Ralph was talking to her, quietly and pleasantly, and Jessy was listening with a rapt, attentive expression on her countenance, as though she thought both the speaker and his subject worthy of notice.

"That is as it should be," mused Cora. "Strength and beauty ought to go together; Miss McArthur is decidedly pretty, and Mr. Ralph Burges gives one the idea that he must be somewhat of a hero. I mean, I am sure he would be brave and noble, if occasion called for such qualities."

Just then Ralph's eyes met hers. He was returning the compliment, and watching her also, perhaps. She turned quickly away, and looked towards Fred, who was nearing the end of a "capital story, you know."

"Wasn't it first-rate?" he asked, quickly.

"No doubt it must have been," was the brief reply.

"Well, he had his revenge, after all."

"Revenge! How very wrong!" exclaimed Cora, trying hard to gather up the lost threads of his narration.

"Do *you* call it wrong? Everybody else said he was fully justified. But I don't think you heard all I was saying."

"How careless of me!"

She glanced across the table once more—encountered a flash of the dark eyes, and blushing vividly bent over her dessert-plate to hide her confusion.

"Have I annoyed you?" asked Fred, with surprise.

"Oh, no, I assure you."

"Then I'll tell you another thing that occurred soon after."

But it happened Cora did not hear any more of Fred's anecdotes just then, for the ladies rose from the table, and she was soon flitting away to the drawing-room, leaning on Nesta's arm.

That evening Jessy McArthur and Ralph sang duets together. He turned over her music, selected the songs he liked, and then their voices rang out together, blending most harmoniously. Scotch, Irish, or English, grave or gay, it did not matter, their store seemed inexhaustible; on they went as though they could have sung duets until midnight.

The rest of the party listened, or talked, or amused themselves, just as they chose, for the songs were not so much for the entertainment of the audience as for that of the performers themselves.

Nesta had challenged Fred to a game of chess, which they seemed to think required a great deal of argument, for there was plenty of sparring over every move.

Cora sat quietly in the shade of the lace curtains at the open window, where she could by turns have a peep at the calm stars as they spangled the cloudless sky, and at the various groups of people in the large, well-lighted rooms.

She decided there was no doubt in the world but that Miss McArthur and Ralph Burges were engaged

to be married, just as Olive and Captain Fraser were.

"But oh, I would never think of comparing Ralph with such a man as the Captain," was her mental decision.

Nesta was checkmated at last, much to Fred's delight, who clapped his hands and made a noisy tumult at his success.

"Never mind, I'll have my revenge another evening," laughed back Nesta, as she made her way over to Cora.

"Now that very persevering pair have deserted the piano, I want you to play something, Mousie."

"Yes, do favour us, Miss Forest; we shall be very pleased to hear you," urged Mrs. Burges.

Cora went at once to the piano, and began Schubert's Seventh Symphony.

"That was one of our 'stock school pieces.' I recollect playing it on my last public evening at Westville House," said Olive, with that superior smile of hers.

"I thought you would remember it, and I played the symphony that it might recall old days," said Cora.

"What do you call public evenings?" asked Captain Fraser.

"Oh, the most melancholy exhibitions you can fancy. Once a month all the young ladies used to put on their best dresses and clean collars and cuffs, and stick bows of ribbon in their hair, and then we were ushered into the drawing-room, and played pieces, and sang songs to one another, and to Mrs.

Woodhouse, and to Miss Winifred," explained Olive, laughing.

"No gentlemen admitted, of course?" inquired the Captain, with a smile.

"Not the shadow of one! *That* would have been against the rules."

"I like the public evenings very much, and I don't consider gentlemen are so very necessary to make one enjoy oneself," retorted Nesta, indignant at her sister's description.

"Of course, *you* don't think so, my dear. It would be too advanced an opinion for girls of your age," put in Fred, briskly.

"Play something else, Cora," asked Nesta, disdaining to take any notice of Fred's insinuation.

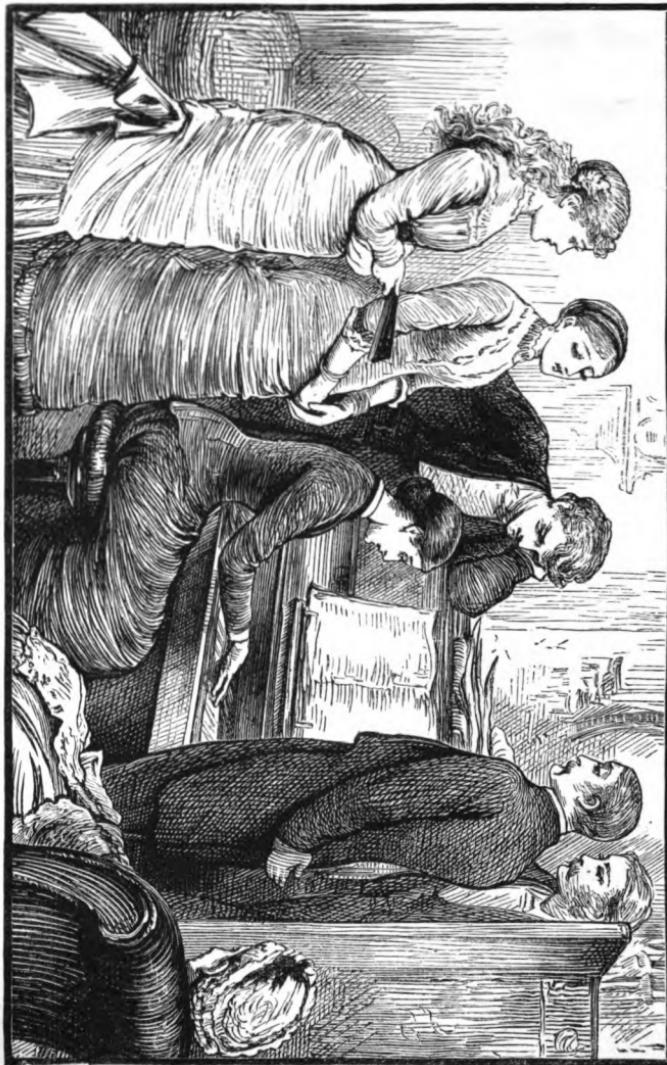
Cora had a taste, almost a genius, for music. Whatever she attempted she played well, and with intense feeling, throwing her whole heart into the music her fingers evoked.

"After having had nine years to learn, and all my holidays to practise, the least that can be expected is that I ought to play decently," she once explained to Nesta.

As Captain Fraser seconded Nesta's request for something else, Cora struck off with vigour a brilliant overture by Cherubini, then a magical mazurka by Chopin that made the Captain unconsciously beat time with his foot, as though he fully appreciated the perfect rhythm.

"Don't get up—please, don't leave the piano yet," pleaded Ralph, who had joined the group near the music stool; and then the girl paused a moment, and

"SIE GLIDED INTO THE AIR OF 'ST. GABRIEL,'"



began a dreamy nocturne, delicate and refined in its expression, and plaintive as a wail in some of its passages. Then, by almost imperceptible gradations, she glided into the air of "St. Gabriel," and they knew she was playing an evening hymn, in which they all joined—

The radiant morn hath passed away,
And spent too soon her golden store;
The shadows of departing day
Creep on once more.

Our life is but a fading dawn,
Its glorious noon how quickly past;
Lead us, O Christ, when all is gone,
Safe home at last.

O by Thy soul-inspiring grace
Uplift our hearts to realms on high;
Help us to look to that bright place
Beyond the sky;

Where light, and life, and joy, and peace
In undivided empire reign,
And thronging angels never cease
Their deathless strain :

Where saints are clothed in spotless white,
And evening shadows never fall,
Where Thou, Eternal Light of Light,
Art Lord of all. Amen.

"That is a very fit introduction for our evening prayers," said Mrs. Burges, in a quiet, earnest tone, the influence of which was felt by all, as she rang the bell for the servants.

CHAPTER VI.

REDSTONE GORGE.

THE next morning Nesta took Cora out to see the dairy, which stood some distance from the house, hidden by a thick clump of shrubbery. What pats of delicious cream! what pats of rich golden butter were piled upon the dishes on the centre table! From the tiled flooring to the pails, strainers, and whey-tub, all was pure and fresh and clean. White roses peeped in at the barred windows, and added their sweetness to the fragrance of the dairy products.

"Papa takes great interest in his dairy," said Nesta, "and prides himself on his choice Devons, and Shorthorns, and Herefords, but I can't say I much love the bovine race, they have too many horns for me; and I'm very much afraid of the creatures when I meet them in a narrow lane."

"I don't suppose they would hurt you?"

"Of course not, but, all the same, I'm frightened. Don't tell Fred, or he'd never stop teasing. Now come and have a look at the stables."

Standing near the stable-yard they met the Squire, who had already been on a visit of inspection.

He prided himself on his horses; indeed, there were many things on which the Squire prided himself. He had what is metaphorically called "many irons in the fire." Not contented with being owner and master of the Marleigh estate, he was also magistrate of the district, and it was also his voice that pronounced sentence on delinquent game poachers and on those belligerent subjects of Brixleigh who could not live in peace with their families and their neighbours.

Also, he was one of the directors of the Brixleigh Bank, a very flourishing concern, paying at the time fourteen per cent. interest. Not that Squire Burges had any particular knowledge of banking affairs, or even pretended to such knowledge, but he liked being "director," had many shares in the business, and had unlimited confidence in Mr. Henderson, the manager. Add to this the Squire liked coursing and riding, and it will be seen that his life was by no means an idle one.

Still, his cares and occupations lay lightly on his head, for he was an easy-tempered, pleasant, airy sort of man, who liked society, loved his wife, was proud of his children, and was ever more ready to gather the flowers rather than the thorns of life.

The Squire was pleased to meet the girls, and to find Cora really cared about seeing the place and its occupants. It gave him an opportunity of showing her his well-ventilated stables, the loose boxes, har-

ness room, and corn closet, and expatiating on each object as he pointed it out.

There were three horses : his own hunter, a large bay, with a noble head, large mild eyes, and feet that *would* keep pawing the ground ; a chesnut, called "Mamma's own carriage horse," though she rarely used it herself, so it was constantly employed in riding or driving by other members of the family ; the other animal was Sultan, an underbred creature, who seemed quite as happy drawing a turnip-cart as a landau.

Nesta had promised to show Cora the fowls—the golden-pencilled and silver-spangled Hamburgs, the Shanghais, and Dorkings, and Malays, also some lovely pigs, sixteen in number, plump, fleshy little things, with small heads and unexceptionable manners, who neither gobbled up chickens nor otherwise misconducted themselves.

But these intentions were not carried out just then, for Fred's voice was heard calling them loudly, and shouting in alternate variety an imitation of the Australian coey.

"What do you want with us ?" asked Nesta.

"Oh, I thought I should find you girls out amongst the live stock. I say, what do you think of going to Redstone Gorge ? There are twelve different sorts of ferns growing there, and to-day would be splendid for it."

"Should you like it, Cora ?" asked Nesta.

"I should like fern-hunting, but I don't know what the Gorge is like."

"Oh, a grand old gloomy chasm, between four

hills. And there's a deep river in the middle of it, where you can get capital fish," explained Fred.

"I don't intend fishing," said Nesta.

"But I do. There are splendid pink and pale salmon-coloured trout, that mother likes so much, and if I don't get ten or a dozen shan't I be surprised!"

Fred was already armed with a long rod, a lot of tackle, and a basket strapped across his shoulders.

"How far is it to Redstone Gorge?" asked Cora.

"Only five miles to the very end of it. We shall just have a ten miles walk there and back. You don't mind that, do you?"

"Not at all," replied Cora, promptly.

To girls of seventeen or eighteen a mile or two, more or less, does not much matter. It is only when age has crushed down the elastic temperament of youth that the steps speedily grow halting, and the long walk and the scramble become a weariness and a vexation.

"I had better go in and tell mamma, and have the sandwich-case filled," said Nesta.

"All right! and we can get a drink of milk at old Steve Barton's farm, at the end of the Gorge," suggested Fred.

Off they went in the bright morning sunshine, ascending first a hillocky slope, then crossing a wild moor, until they reached a narrow winding road that led by slow descent to the far-famed Gorge.

As they entered the narrow pathway it seemed like shutting out the sunlight. Tall trees met over their heads, huge rocks were piled up the steep sides of

the chasm as though some tremendous earthquake had happened in the far-away past, and the hills had yawned wide open, never to close again. But the softening touch of nature had decked the stern ruins with beauty—a tangled undergrowth covered the soil, gigantic weeds held up their heads in regal triumph, numberless ferns waved their fronds in quiet corners, and upturned roots and masses of stone were covered with green moss and lichens.

Deep down was the river—in some places tumbling over rocks in babbling waterfalls ; in others lying in dark, silent pools, whose calm surface reflected the straggling branches of the tall trees.

“ Yonder is a pool that they say has no bottom ; its depths have never been sounded,” said Fred, as he pointed out a deep gully, full of water, and most treacherous-looking in its solemn placitude. One false step on the precipitous side of the cliff would have been fatal.

“ They say two fond lovers were drowned there. The girl slipped and tumbled in, and her swain dived after her regardless of consequences ; to make a long story short, they never came out again, and their bodies have never been found.”

“ I don’t believe a word of that story,” exclaimed Nesta, impetuously.

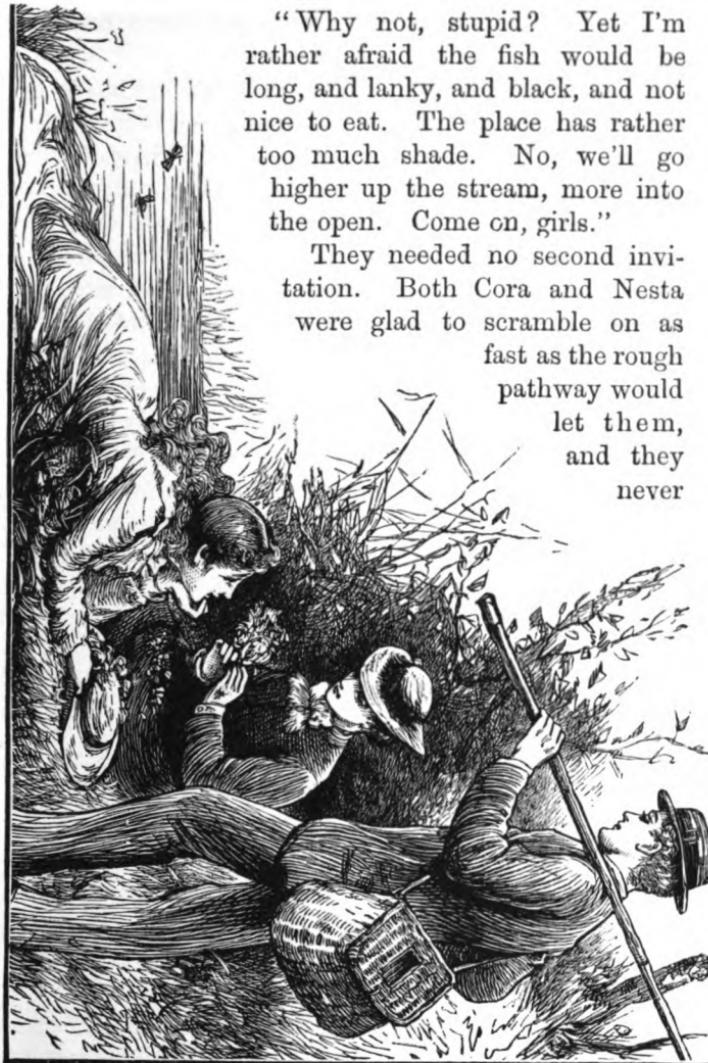
“ Believe it or not, as you choose ; but it is quite certain an old man fell in there one day. He came out here all alone angling, and he wasn’t found until a week afterwards ; very few people come this way.”

“ Surely you are never going to angle in that frightful place ? ” said Nesta, with a shiver.

"Why not, stupid? Yet I'm rather afraid the fish would be long, and lanky, and black, and not nice to eat. The place has rather too much shade. No, we'll go higher up the stream, more into the open. Come on, girls."

They needed no second invitation. Both Cora and Nesta were glad to scramble on as fast as the rough pathway would let them, and they never

"I DON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF THAT STORY," EXCLAIMED NESTA,



rested until they found themselves "more in the open."

Fred told splendid stories. He dashed on through fact and fiction, almost bewildering his hearers in their endeavours to extract the true from the false, the real from the fabricated. Peals of gleeful laughter rang out through the wild solitude, and they were contented to be mirthful and merry, grave and rational, just as the humour took them.

At times, as a slight diversion, Nesta and Fred had slight sparring matches. There was a gush of highly animated, contradictory argument for a few minutes, that always died away, harmless as the light summer breeze that stirred the leaves around them.

It was a time to be remembered—that sweet, long day, spent in the solitudes of nature, amidst the fresh, the pure, and the beautiful.

They had found the dozen kinds of fern, and Fred had a first-rate day's angling, for, after much patient waiting, fourteen lovely trout, with red-tipped fins, dusky green eyes, silvery gills, and dark spotted backs, lay in his basket, ready to be presented in due form to his mother.

They came slowly homeward across the moors, and Cora looked with a little dismay at her mud-soaked boots, and at more than a few hitches and rents in her grey homespun dress.

"There will be work for your needle," said Nesta, laughing.

"Yes, and I feel a little sorry my poor dress has had such rough usage among the brambles and branches."

"Do you really care about it?" asked Nesta, quickly.

"I ought not to, I daresay. Why should damaged drapery annoy me when I have had such a glorious day?" replied she, with a laugh, that somehow ended in a sigh.

When they reached home it was nearly dinner-time, and after a hurried toilet the girls ran down to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Burges was sitting there, beside her low table, with her muslin work in her fingers. Wearing her pale grey dress and unruffled laces, and with a soft, pink bloom on her cheeks, she looked as though she had been sitting there, calm and undisturbed, ever since they had parted with her in the morning.

"We have had such a long walk, such scrambling and climbing!" said Nesta, with a gush.

"Don't let them tire you too much, Cora. My children have very high spirits, and rather adventurous natures—I think more so, perhaps, than is good for them," asserted Mrs. Burges.

"I have enjoyed myself very much," replied Cora.

Two events had happened on that day at the Grange. The first was that Clara and Alice Henderson had been there to invite them all to a garden *fête* and dinner on the next Thursday, and the other event was, that Olive, with Ralph and Captain Fraser, had had an early repast, and were gone over to Brixleigh, to a "Penny Reading."

"I quite forgot that this is the evening for the

grand entertainment at Brixleigh. Ralph and Jessy McArthur are to sing two duets together, and a solo each. I wonder how they will get on?"

"Very well, Nesta, I daresay. They were wishing you were here, Cora, to go with them—indeed, Ralph thought you might have been persuaded to play that nocturne you gave us last evening, and that charmed us so much. Should you like to have gone to Brixleigh?" asked Mrs. Burges.

"Very much indeed," replied the girl, with a quick blush.

"Then I am sorry Fred kept you out so long. It cannot be helped now."

"What are you saying about me? and why is Cora looking so grave?" asked Fred, coming into the room at the moment, with his fourteen trout reposing on a grassy carpet on a dish.

"She is fretting because she did not go to the Brixleigh 'Penny Reading,'" replied Nesta, at random.

"She could not have been in two places at once," said Fred.

"Of course I could not," retorted Cora, with a bright smile. "We had a delightful day at the Gorge, and I should be positively 'avaricious' if one enjoyment were not sufficient for me at one time. I did not say a word about being sorry."

Yet more than once during dinner-time—and they looked so few that evening, seated at the large table—Cora caught herself glancing towards Ralph's empty place, and wondering if he and Miss McArthur had

yet begun their duets and songs at the "Penny Reading."

"I should like to have heard them sing," decided she. "But there, I must not be 'avaricious,' as I told Fred just now."

CHAPTER VII.

GATHERING RIPE FRUIT.

CORA was seated in Nesta's "den" the next morning, busy with needle and scissors, mending her tattered homespun dress. Dire were the zigzag rents and bias splits, many the jags and frays. Her mouth was pursed up in thoughtful perplexity, her fingers were weary with ineffectual darnings, when Nesta burst into the room like a sun-ray.

"You dear, darling, puzzled pet! I have been consulting mamma about that dress of yours; she quite agrees with me that it has gone beyond your skill of patching and mending. But a few yards of darker material, added to it, will make it bloom like a phoenix springing from its ashes. So roll it up quickly."

"What do you mean, Nesta?"

"Miss Wills, our dressmaker, from Brixleigh, is downstairs, and she will take away the dress, and bring it back shortly, in fit condition."

"But the trouble!"

"Never mind the trouble, Cora. I'll help you to fold it, and I want you to do a favour for me."

"Gladly. What is it?"

"Some people are coming to dinner to-day, and I always see to the dessert and flowers, when I am at home, and I am awfully busy this morning. Will you gather me some peaches from the garden? You'll find them quite ripe on the sunny side of the wall."

"Shall I get any other fruit?"

"Well, yes. Take a large basket with you. There are some of all sizes in the store-room, and if any nectarines are ready, or if the birds have left any cherries, or—stay, don't forget to go down to the espalier wall-trees at the lower end of the garden. There will be sure to be lots of pears ripe."

Armed with these instructions, Cora soon found herself out in the sunny kitchen garden, with a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head, a huge straw basket on her arm—lithe, bright, and active as any young modern Pomona could be.

She had already laid half-a-dozen ripe peaches in her basket, when she heard a voice asking—

"Shall I help you, Miss Forest?"

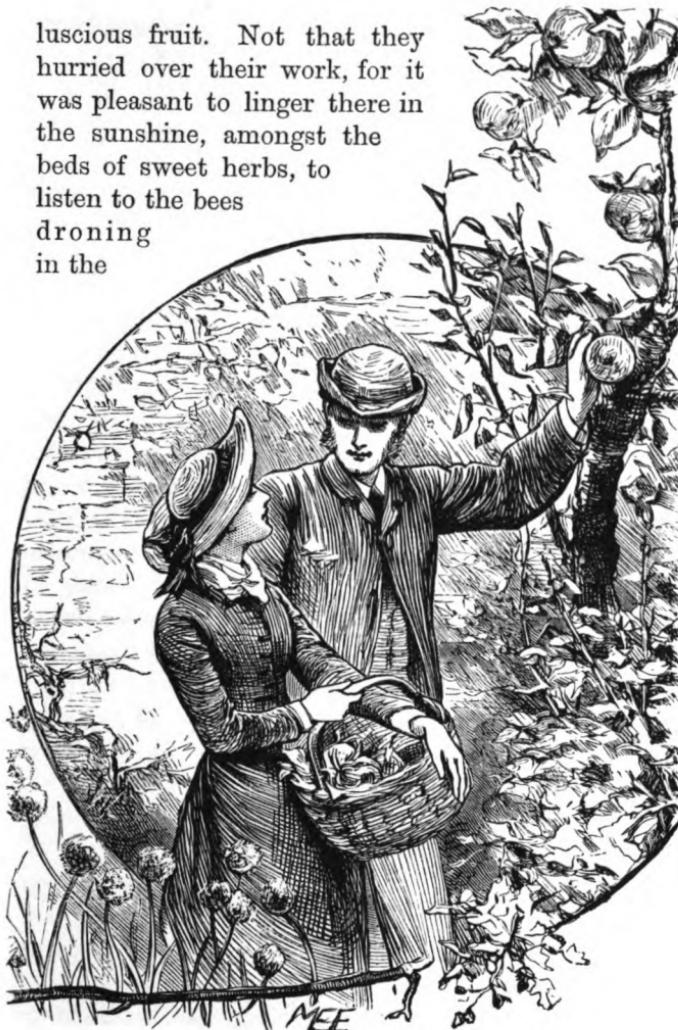
Looking round, she saw Ralph standing by her side.

"Thank you, I am looking for ripe fruit," and a quick blush rose to her cheeks, bright as the bloom on the peaches.

"You have hardly found the best trees. Come lower down the garden; I will show you some far better ones."

Between them the basket was filled with fragrant,

luscious fruit. Not that they hurried over their work, for it was pleasant to linger there in the sunshine, amongst the beds of sweet herbs, to listen to the bees droning in the



"BETWEEN THEM THE BASKET WAS FILLED."

blossoms, and to see the butterflies flitting about like animated flower-leaves.

Ralph said the "Penny Reading" had been a success.

"We are trying to make them an institution in Brixleigh," he said. "Numbers of girls and young lads frequent the low music hall and the public-houses there, and we want to win them away from these places by the power of counter-attraction."

"Do you think you will succeed?"

Ralph shrugged his shoulders, as he replied—

"It is rather too soon to judge. We have only had two entertainments; both were crowded, and pretty much by the right kind of audience. Some friends living in the neighbourhood have banded themselves to provide amusements, such as instrumental pieces, songs, readings, recitations, &c. It stands to reason, when the youths of Brixleigh hear better things they will have a growing distaste for vulgar trash and inane absurdity. But, like most reformations, no doubt this will be a slow process; perhaps, for a time, even an imperceptible one—but we must not lose heart, we must wait and hope."

"What pleasure you will have in watching the growing improvement!"

"I shall not be here much to watch during the coming winter, for I soon return to Cambridge. I can but take the first step in the effort, then leave it in other hands. Miss Forest, I want you to play a piece on our next evening."

"Oh, I shall be delighted!" Cora's cheeks crimsoned, her eyes flashed with genuine pleasure at the

bare idea of being able to do something in return for all the kindnesses so continually showered on her head by these friends of hers.

Presently she said, with a shy glance of her lustrous eyes—

“ Do you really think I can play well enough, Mr. Burges ? ”

She did not ask the question by way of extracting a compliment from this very practical, thoughtful, dark-eyed young man by her side. She was above such petty trickishness, and in her unselfish wish to be of use forgot the possible individual triumph, or the reverse, that might be hers.

Ralph looked full into her questioning eyes, as he replied slowly—

“ Do I think you play well enough ? Need you ask after the treat you gave me the other evening ? I shall not soon forget it, I assure you.”

“ Then if it will not weary you I might play over a few things, and you could select what would be most suited.”

“ Never fear. I shall not speedily grow wearied with playing such as yours. We will begin this evening. No ; I forgot. The McArthurs and some others are coming. We must wait until we can get the piano to ourselves.”

The gong was heard sounding loudly for luncheon, proclaiming to all whom it might concern that the Burges family were expected to assemble without delay.

“ Let me carry the basket of fruit for you,” said Ralph, as he took the tempting burden from her

hands. And so they came through the kitchen garden together.

Fred met them on the lawn.

"Wherever have you two been hiding yourselves? I have been hunting for you all over the place."

"Picking fruit," said Cora, briefly.

"You should have asked me to help you."

"There was no need. I had plenty of assistance; see the result," said she, laughing, as she pointed to the full basket.

She darted up the broad steps, and ran to her room to smooth her hair and make herself presentable ere she appeared in the dining-room.

Fred seemed to have determined Cora should not again take unlimited rambles in the garden without his society, so for the rest of the day he danced attendance on her with unwearyed perseverance, by turns amusing, or plaguing, or teasing her, sometimes vexing her with his nonsense, again luring a bright laugh to her lip by his sparkling fun.

It was all the same to him so long as he held sole possession of her attention. She grew tired at last, and said rather impatiently, as she glanced round the room at the assembled party—

"Why don't you go and make yourself useful? There are ever so many young ladies in the room who look quite *distract* for want of some one to talk to them. How can you be so idle, Fred?"

"I am not idle; I am admiring you," retorted he, looking up into her face.

"You know I hate absurdity, and it is not kind of you to make me conspicuous before all these people.

Your mamma looks as if she wants me ; I shall go over to her."

"As long as you stay beside the *mater*, I shan't complain. You'll go down to supper with me, won't you, Cora?"

"I cannot promise anything of the sort, so make your mind quite easy on that point," said Cora, with a little laugh, as she went away and seated herself on a low stool beside Mrs. Burges's sofa, and there she remained until Ralph came to claim a promise she had made him of playing that nocturne over once again.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT LONGFLEET HALL.

THE day of the Hendersons' *fête* came at last, and after breakfast Nesta ran down to the drawing-room to Cora, who, for the last hour, had been playing over some pieces for Ralph, and told her she was wanted. There was an air of mystery in Nesta's face as she led the way to Cora's own room.

On the bed was displayed a white cashmere dress, trimmed with white silk, slip, and all the other paraphernalia, complete.

"What a lovely costume!" exclaimed Cora.
"Yours, Nesta?"

"No, but yours, Mousie. Not a word now; it is mamma's present to you, and she would be hurt beyond measure if you objected."

"It is too kind of her. How shall I ever repay her?" said the girl, much moved.

"Don't talk of that, Cora. Try on your dress; mine is exactly the same. We shall be like sisters to-day."

"Here is my homespun too. It looks so respectable I hardly recognised it."

"Yes. Miss Wills is very clever; even an old garment looks new when she takes it in hand. Far better than darning and patching, is it not, Cora? You could never have made it look so nice."

"The new kilting and trimmings cover all the rents. I never saw anything so well done," replied Cora, approvingly.

"Age blooms with renewed youth," laughed Nesta. "And now perhaps I had better enlighten you as to our programme for to-day. First, early luncheon, then elaborate toilettes. After they are complete papa will drive Olive, you, and me over to Longfleet Hall, Mr. Henderson's place, you know. Ralph and Fred are to ride, that is, if the latter does not come to grief. He galloped away to Brixleigh on Sultan an hour ago for something that had been forgotten—his gloves, perhaps."

In the afternoon, when the western sun was shining full on the windows of Marleigh Grange, the three girls were assembled in the drawing-room in their "gala" costume for Mrs. Burges's inspection, and a fair group of youth and beauty they made, as they stood laughing and talking beside her sofa. Ralph and Fred were at the other end of the room, the latter in some tribulation because his gloves were a misfit. The Squire had not yet made his appearance.

Cora seated herself on a low stool by Mrs. Burges's feet, and said in a low tone—

"Thank you so much for your kindness to me.

Indeed, I am not worthy of it, and—and—I can never repay you."

"Foolish girl! to think so much of a mere trifle," said Mrs. Burges, smiling and kissing the fair young face that was upturned to her. "While you are under my roof, my dear, I consider you as like my own daughter."

"Oh, how I wish I was in very *deed* and *truth* your own daughter!" exclaimed Cora, with deep feeling in her voice.

"Your wish shall be granted. You shall be my wife! Mother, give us, your children, your blessing!" said Fred, in a highly dramatic tone, and flinging himself down beside the girl, he placed his arm round her waist, and drew her towards him.

Cora rose to her feet, her cheeks crimson, her eyes flashing with anger, and darted out of the room, followed by a little scornful laugh from Olive and by the delinquent Fred.

"How dare you travesty my words like that! It is very hard when one speaks in earnest to have all they say turned into burlesque," said she, turning on Fred, with her dark eyes full of quick tears.

"Don't be such a little fury, Cora! I don't see such burlesque in it at all. If Ralph had said what I did you would not have flown away into such a temper."

"He would not have made such a goose of himself," retorted Ralph, who was at the moment passing through the hall where Cora and Fred were "having it out," as the latter termed it.

"I'm sure I beg your pardon if I annoyed you, Cora. Will you forgive me?" asked Fred, meekly.

"Oh, yes, I forgive you," she said, smiling through her tears.

"Then come into the conservatory, and I will cut you a bouquet."

Fred soon recovered his spirits, and began talking about the Hendersons.

"Are the daughters nice girls?" asked Cora.

"Oh, I should just think they are! Clara, the eldest, goes in for high art and singing. Her voice is much like a peacock's that has pitched the tune an octave too high."

"For shame, Fred."

"Alice, the youngest, sings also; 'contralto,' she calls it, but she always puts me in mind of that estimable bird, the chough, with a severe cold."

"If you don't take care you will become dreadfully satirical. I see it growing on you," said Cora, reprovingly.

"Shall I? Oh, I don't think so. Here are your flowers; I have mixed in some stephanotis and pink daphne," said he, presenting her with a handsome, fragrant bouquet.

When they returned to the drawing-room, Mr. Burges was there with a crimson rosebud in his buttonhole, a scent of mille-fleur on his pocket-handkerchief, and looking like what he really was—a fair specimen of a good-natured, simple-hearted, easy-tempered, hearty country squire.

He was bending over his wife, and saying—

"I wish you could come with us to-day, Catherine."

She looked up at him with her sweet, pathetic smile.

"I shall be with you in heart, Percy."

"Yes, but in bodily presence I mean. It is dreary for you to have to stay here alone, when so many kind friends at Longfleet Hall would rejoice to see you with them."

"I do not murmur."

"True, you bear your trials beautifully. Very few would be as patient as you are, my dear."

"After all, it is not so much to bear, Percy. With my work and books I am never dull, and then there is the prospect of seeing you come home again, and hearing of all you have seen and heard."

By-and-by the carriage was announced, and a gallant party they looked as they drove along the sunny green lanes. Behind the carriage came the three horsemen, Ralph, Fred, and Captain Rollo Fraser, who had come over from the barracks to go with them.

Longfleet Hall was built, in what Mr. Henderson called, "after the Jacobean style." It was, in fact, an admixture of classical, Italian, and all kinds of Gothic and pointed architecture, and the result was an imposing, showy building. Mr. Henderson had superintended the skilled workmen himself, and was justly proud of the result.

The gardens and grounds were marvels of ingenuity. The very irregularities of nature were made use of to produce picturesque effects. Labyrinths of shady walks, grassy slopes, clumps of trees, broad flower-beds, series of terraces, flanked with graceful statues,

fountains that flung crystal jets up in the sunlight, and artificial waters that produced magical lakes and waterfalls.

Add to gardens such as these, crowds of people—ladies decked in all the tints of the rainbow, officers from the barracks, landed proprietors, and, indeed, all the eligible males gathered forth from the length and breadth of the county—and some idea may be formed of the Longfleet Hall *fête*. Several tents were on the lawn. Under a clump of trees a string band was sending forth inspiriting strains, and croquet, lawn-tennis, Badminton, and archery were in full swing when the Marleigh Grange party entered the grounds.

Clara Henderson came towards them, in all the glory of a *grenouille* Persian cashmere toxophilite costume, embroidered in gold. She shook hands all round, and gave a slight nod to Cora.

"Late, as usual!" she exclaimed. "Papa is on the upper terrace, Mr. Burges. Olive, Nesta, what will you play? We are just going to begin fresh games. Ralph and Fred, I leave you to find places for yourselves."

Having thus set every one occupation, Miss Henderson flitted away, followed by most of the new arrivals. Mr. Burges went to search for her father, and Ralph stopped behind to ask Cora Forest if she liked croquet.

"It is the only garden game I can play," replied she. "We have a very decent croquet ground at Westville House, and Mrs. Woodhouse calls using the mallet 'good exercise,' so we often play on half-holidays."

"Will you be my partner in a game?"

"With pleasure; I shall quite enjoy it."

But here Clara Henderson again made her appearance on the scene.

"Oh, Ralph, I thought you were coming! We want you to join in lawn-tennis, everybody is waiting."

"I can't just now, for I'm going to play croquet with Miss Forest."

"We really cannot do without you. I'll introduce Miss Forest to another partner. Here, Harry Selton," called out Miss Henderson to a youth of sixteen, slim and shy. "This is Miss Forest, she will play croquet with you—you don't mind, do you?" she asked as she bowed to Cora, and hurried off with Ralph, without waiting for a reply.

Cora had plenty of time when the game was over to ramble about and explore the grounds. She felt an unknown nobody, amidst a gay crowd, who were, or, at any rate, seemed to be, fully occupied and amused.

Some were promenading or standing in groups, laughing and talking, but all were strangers to her. She had lost sight of the Burgeses from the very first.

She almost started when some one called her by name, and, turning round, saw Mr. Tomson, the village surgeon, a little grey man, who looked more shabbily dressed, more out of his element, more bored than the rest of the guests.

"All alone, Miss Forest? This is a fine place, is it not?"

"Yes, I have been exploring a little—the grounds are beautifully laid out."

"Come with me to the top of that hill yonder, and you'll see the whole at a glance. Now then, isn't this fine?" said he, when they had mounted the slight ascent.

"It's well to be manager of an 'unlimited banking company,' Miss Forest. I'm a bit inclined to be discontented when I think of my profession, and the 'toiling and moiling' there is to get income enough to keep one's family. Look at this man—this Henderson!—he seems to coin money; all he touches turns to gold; he lives like a prince in the land. I wish he'd teach me his secret, that I do."

"I think your profession by far the best, Mr. Tomson. What can be nobler than going about healing the sick, giving comfort to the suffering, and strength to the weak?" and as she asked the question, and looked down on the gay crowds, her thoughts fled away to the "Great Physician," who went about in Galilee, amongst the blind, dumb, and maimed, "healing them all."

Mr. Tomson's complaining voice roused her from her meditation.

"Yes, my dear young lady, looking at things in that light your words are true. I love my profession, and would not exchange it to be even Mr. Henderson; but I suppose a hard-worked, badly-paid village doctor may grumble a bit sometimes."

Twilight was fast creeping up over the lawn, when a sparkle of lamps burst forth from trees and tents, and soon afterwards carriages rolled up to the gates,



"YES, LOOKING AT THINGS IN THAT LIGHT, YOUR WORDS
ARE TRUE."

G 2

and most of the people drove away. Only about forty favoured guests had, like Squire Burges and his family, received especial invitations to dinner. The Miss Hendersons seemed to think it necessary to pay unusual attentions to the Marleigh Grange party. They almost monopolised them altogether, and appeared even to grudge Cora Forest her share of their friendship.

Clara Henderson took possession of Ralph, and he could not easily throw off her toils, even had he wished to do so. Alice made perpetual engagements for Fred, introduced him to numbers of nice girls, and almost bewildered the boy with her flattering notice. She called him her "knight errant," made him "fetch and carry," and do her bidding on every possible occasion.

It was quite a state dinner. The plate was massive, the flowers down the table exotic and rare, the footmen unexceptionable. The master of the house was half a head shorter than Squire Burges, and ten times more important. He had a suasive manner, and keen, dark, penetrating eyes, that always seemed to be watching you, reading you through and through, though it was very difficult to meet their full gaze. Mrs. Henderson was pompous, like her husband, showily dressed, with diamonds sparkling from her hair, neck, and fingers.

Cora had opportunity to notice all this, for she went in to dinner with Harry Selton, the "slim, shy" youth, who turned out to be a cousin of the Hendersons. He did not trouble her much with conversation, all his remarks being brief,

and his replies of the most monosyllabic character.

They went away soon after dinner, journeying back much in the same manner as that in which they had arrived. The only difference was that Captain Rollo Fraser had gone direct to the barracks.

That night, as Cora was sitting in her room enjoying a calm half-hour's reading ere she prepared for bed, a gentle tap came to the door next the "den," and Nesta entered in her dressing-gown, and with her long hair streaming over her shoulders.

The visit was an unusual one, for Cora had from the first protested against gossiping after the hour when everybody had retired to their rooms and were supposed to be gone to bed.

Cora shut the Book reverently, and also closed the locket with her father's portrait, which had been lying beside her on the table.

"You are surprised to see me, I daresay," said Nesta, as she seated herself on one of the low chairs, and began to gaze out on the stars with a slight frown on her brow.

Cora went over, and stood looking down at her.

"That was no end of a 'swell' party, but I'm glad it's over," said Nesta, yawning.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Only middling. There were too many strangers, and not enough people I knew."

"Who were missing? I thought everybody in the county was there."

"The McArthurs were not, for instance."

"Were they invited?"

"I'm sure I don't know; I never asked Clara. But the Hendersons and the McArthurs don't get on well together."

"What is the reason?"

"Their tastes are different, I suppose. Clara and Alice Henderson don't help one bit in the parish, though they know Jessy McArthur is half worked to death with district visiting, and mothers' meetings, and the schools. When I leave Westville House for good I shall be able to help a little, I hope. You see, neither mamma nor Olive do anything of the sort now. Cora, I'm awfully afraid you'll be furious when you hear what I have to tell you."

"What is it, Nesta?"

"The Hendersons have invited Fred and me there to spend the day to-morrow, and to play lawn-tennis; and though I gave hints without number to Clara, she would *not* invite you."

"That does not annoy me in the least."

"But it seems so strange and rude when she knows you are on a visit to us. Olive and Captain Fraser are going also, and so is Ralph if he returns from Brixleigh in time. I've a great mind to write a note to-morrow morning, and say I cannot go."

"Don't do anything of the sort. I shall be quite happy at Marleigh in your absence, so, please, don't vex yourself any more. You will begin to consider me a perpetual encumbrance if I expect to go wherever you are invited."

"I'm awfully glad you are not annoyed about it."

"How many more awfullys, Nesta? When will

you leave off 'slang'?" asked Cora, with smiling reproof.

"*Vous pouvez me croire* that slang is infectious. I felt I was catching it at the Hendersons' party. It rages in this generation like an epidemic, and only proper people, like you and Miss Winifred, are likely to escape it," said Nesta, laughing, her good humour quite restored.

"I am sure it is not pretty."

"But it is expressive, *ma chère*. One can say in a few words what would take such a man as Dr. Johnson oceans of nouns and avalanches of verbs and articles to express. But adieu, *il est plus tard que je me pensais*," and Nesta flitted away as suddenly as she had appeared.

Another conversation was taking place at the same time in Marleigh Grange, and this was between the Squire and Mrs. Burges. The latter had waited up until her husband's return, and had been listening with great interest to his graphic account of the *fête* at the palatial mansion. All at once he changed the subject.

"My dear, I think it our duty to do all we can to increase our income. I am not a rich man, and we have many expenses. There is Olive, who will soon want her *trousseau* and a thousand pounds or so; and there is Ralph, whose college education costs no trifle. Fred will soon have his commission; and Nesta, sly puss! will, I daresay, be thinking about getting married some day. And so I have promised to take fifty more shares in the Brixleigh Bank."

"Have you, Percy?"

"Yes; what could I do better for you and my children? I have a hundred and seventy shares in the bank now, and it pays splendid dividends. The capital is enormous. Henderson showed me a draft of the last balance-sheet this very evening."

"Mr. Henderson seems to have a strange way of uniting business and pleasure," said Mrs. Burges, gravely.

"Oh, what I speak of came about quite by accident, you may say. Henderson, Tomson, and I were having a chat together in the library after we left the dinner table. Only think! the cautious, canny Scotchman, Tomson, has promised to take twenty shares in the bank himself."

"Oh, I am so sorry! What would become of him, poor man, if anything went wrong? He has nine helpless children depending on him!" exclaimed Mrs. Burges, with a look of alarm and a tone of intense anxiety.

"What could possibly go *wrong* in a flourishing concern like the Brixleigh Bank? My dear, you are too fond of conjuring up imaginary evils. I am sure that morbid cast of mind must add to your delicate health, and retard your recovery."

Mrs. Burges did not ask any more questions. She knew there was a limit even to the good-natured Squire's serenity of temper, and she was ever careful not to overstep the limit.

She replied cheerfully to his little taunt, and quickly changed the subject. Yet her soft, white hand trembled as she stealthily wiped away some

tears that had sprung to her eyes, and more than once that night she lay awake repeating, " Give us neither poverty nor riches. Let us be contented, not 'making haste' to be rich, not of those who seek the inheritance that may be gotten hastily at the beginning, but the end of which is not blessed. But rather let us, my poor Percy and me, strive to store up the eternal treasures in the 'many mansions.' "

CHAPTER IX.

UNDER THE BEECHES.

NESTA and Fred went away the next morning in very apologetical frames of mind. They were *so* distressed, *so* sorry Cora was not going with them. But the girl laughed merrily, and told them their commiseration was quite thrown away on her, and she said the truth. The remembrance of that *fête* at Longfleet Hall had not left the brightest possible impression on her mind. She felt no delight in the ostentatious show, the pomp, and the glitter. It seemed to her somehow hollow, overstrained, and overdone. The slight opportunities of speech she had had with the Miss Hendersons had not made her rapturous. Clara had openly attempted to snub her. Alice, she soon discovered, was a desperate flirt, fond of display and admiration, and silly and trifling to a degree.

Most probably the young ladies of the Hall had read something of these opinions in the clear, wide-open, truthful eyes of this young "chit" of a school-girl. Nesta's friend had detected a few of her old-

fashioned notions of right and wrong, of honour and thoroughness, in the outspoken way in which she had met a few of their remarks, and they had shown their disapproval in not inviting her there again.

As soon as Cora found herself at liberty she determined to set about an occupation she had been planning for some days past. This was no less than making a painting of Marleigh Grange, and presenting it to Mrs. Burges. So she got her colour-box, stool, &c., and seated herself under a large spreading beech tree, where she could have a good view of the front of the house, the conservatory, and shrubbery at the side.

A couple of hours passed rapidly while she was thus employed. The bright sunshine fell on the lawn, and the soft air stole by, laden with perfume caught from the garden beds, as her fingers deftly handled brush and colours.

Then one of the low drawing-room windows was thrown open, and Mrs. Burges stepped forth, leaning on Sarah's arm, and with Phillis behind her bearing rugs and her usual low chair.

Cora threw down her brush and ran to meet Mrs. Burges, hardly believing the evidence of her own eyes. It was the first time she had ever seen her out of doors, and she was quite startled at the sight.

Mrs. Burges came forward, smiling.

"My dear, I have been watching you from the windows for a long time, and I could resist no longer. I have come out to sit with you for a while."

"It will not hurt you, I hope, dear Mrs. Burges?"

"I think not, Cora. The day is so calm and mild, and my inclination was so decided, that I could not keep away. What are you painting?"

"A view of your house. I am doing it for you, if you will think it worthy of acceptance."

"Indeed, I shall value it highly, both for the subject and for your kind thought in doing it. How well you paint!"

Sarah spread the tiger rug in the shade, placed her mistress's chair on it, then brought out the gipsy table and the muslin work.

"I am working a dress for my nephew. His first birthday comes next month, and I want it to be ready for the occasion. I shall have to be industrious, said Mrs. Burges, as she displayed the still unfinished elaborate combination of leaves and buds lightly traced out in blue.

But not for long were they left undisturbed to their industry. Ralph came riding in at the gates, and, as soon as he had dismounted, he ran across the lawn to their retreat.

"You here, mother! I *am* surprised; but I suppose Cora lured you out into the sunshine?"

"Indeed, I did not, Mr. Burges; your mother came here of her own free wish and will."

"You wisely say that, to protect yourself lest any after reflection should arise," said Mrs. Burges, with a smile.

"Yes, I believe that was my reason."

"I thought you were going to Longfleet Hall, Ralph?"

"No, mother. I did not make any rash promise

on the subject, and, whatever my intentions may have been, they are frustrated now. I have not the slightest wish to leave the present scene and company. May I inspect your painting, Cora?" said he, looking over her shoulder.

"It is not finished yet."

"So I perceive; but one can easily see what a capital sketch you are making—touching the dear old place with a poetic beauty, and giving it a picturesqueness I hardly thought possible."

"The irregular style of architecture makes it picturesque, Mr. Ralph."

"Perhaps so, for the very faults that would make a modern architect shiver do not look faulty on paper; in fact, they give an originality, an expression, a force to the picture. But, then, it is genius that teaches where not to imitate slavishly, where to soften, and where to cast the friendly shadow. You have managed the light and shade splendidly."

Ralph flung himself on the grass before his mother and Cora, and began watching their busy fingers.

"You lazy boy!" laughed Mrs. Burges.

"What shall I do? Make me your slave, mother; I will be obedient."

"Get a book and read to us."

"What book? I bought a pocket edition of Longfellow's poems at Brixleigh to-day with a view to selecting some telling piece for the next 'Penny Reading.' Shall I rehearse a page or two from that?"

"If you like."

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By a touch of artist's necromancy Cora had sketched Mrs. Burges, with her gipsy table and work, and with Ralph lying at her feet, as though under a distant beech tree at the opposite side of the house. Ralph held the book in his hand, and his head was bowed as if reading.

"How well you have done the figures!" said Mrs. Burges; "but we still lack one thing to make us remember this pleasant afternoon."

"What is that?" asked Cora.

"Your own figure in the picture, my dear."

"I shall not forget this afternoon, even though there is no visible likeness of you," said Ralph, in a low tone of voice, as he looked into Cora's eyes, and caught no longer the artist's keen gaze, but a shy, timid glance from under the long dark lashes as a bright rose-tint flushed her cheeks.

Sarah made her appearance just then, coming from the house with a tea-tray, and a crimson and gold set of tea-things, tea-pot and kettle to match.

She set them on the small table, and supplemented the repast with a dish of biscuits, another of peaches and grapes.

Hardly had Mrs. Burges begun filling the tea-cups than the Squire arrived on the scene, with the two dogs at his heels—Ponto and Pritz.

"*You* out under the trees, little woman! This is an unexpected event, and upon my word I congratulate you," said he, pressing a kiss on his wife's cheek.

"Ralph, fetch me a chair, my boy; I am going to invite myself to your mother's tea-party."

What a merry meal that was under the beech tree! The Squire told one or two good stories, and joined the laugh at his own wit. He threw scraps of biscuit to the dogs, making them sit on their hind legs and beg for each morsel. And he waited on his wife—"his dear Catherine"—with an old-fashioned courtesy and politeness that might put to shame half the free-and-easy *nonchalance* of the present, or rather of the rising, generation.

Ralph, of course, devoted his attentions to Cora; he cut off the grapes from the huge purple bunches for her, and picked out the ripest peach.

Cora sat demurely sipping her fragrant tea, talking to Ralph now and then in her quiet tone, catching the glance of his dark eyes, and learning, all unknown to herself, a new sweet language, such as heart speaks to heart, a language she was never to forget again.

The party from Longfleet Hall did not return until late, and Nesta followed Cora to her room to express, in private, her continued vexation that the latter had not been invited to the Hall.

"Do not regret it, Nesta; I have been very happy," and she turned slightly away, lest her friend should detect the warm glow that had mounted to her cheeks. "Had you a pleasant day?"

"Better than I expected; Clara and Alice were not so much on 'high-stilts,' not such 'swells,' you know."

"I think I can faintly glean your meaning, Nesta. Were the McArthurs there?"

"No, and I have come to the conclusion that

where the Hendersons are the McArthurs will not be, and *vice versa*, so one must be content to meet one set of friends at a time."

"Which do you prefer?"

Nesta turned round laughingly, tossing her golden curls.

"Now, that is my secret, Cora. You have secrets, I daresay, and I do not seek to dive into them ; that is mine ! Not that one would attempt to compare the Hendersons with the McArthurs," she continued, gravely.

"I suppose not."

"*Voyez-vous*, the Hendersons are all for the show and grandeur of this world ; the McArthurs recognise there is something more needed. I wish I could describe to you all they have done in this parish, Cora. You never knew it in the old times, when the poor were neglected, and even in sickness were not visited ; when the church services were irregular, and dreary beyond measure ; when the singing was not worthy of the name of melody. Now all is changed. Jessy plays the organ herself, and has trained the Sunday-school children, so that they form a capital choir. And there is not a poor sick man down in the village yonder but looks on Charles McArthur as his personal friend."

"What a satisfaction it must be to them to be able to do so much good—to walk in the Master's footsteps!" said Cora.

"It is a satisfaction, pure and unselfish. They do not spare themselves, and, as I told you before, I

have promised to help Jessy McArthur whenever I have the opportunity."

"The rector of the parish is non-resident, I believe?"

"Yes, he is quite an old man, and has been living in the South of France for more than a year; his health is the cause, I think. The rector, you know, is a rich man—has a fortune of his own, and he is a great friend of the Hendersons—has no end of shares in the Brixleigh Bank. It is getting late, I believe?"

"I am quite *sure* of the fact. Good-night, dear Nesta, and though I don't even try to guess your secret, I am glad you know how to choose the best people for your best friends. Friendship is not worthy of the name unless it has a true, sterling foundation, and then it has the sanction of the Divine example, and will doubtless have the Divine blessing."

CHAPTER X.

A N A D V E N T U R E .

"He hoards to-day, he hoards to-morrow, does nothing else but hoard;
At length he has enough a new umbrella to afford;
When all at once he is assailed, a wind arises quick,
And both his hands grasp nothing but a new umbrella stick;"

sang Fred, one fine morning, in a dreary monotone, as he came into the breakfast-room, where Cora and Nesta were standing at the open window, waiting for the rest of the family.

"What's all that about?" asked Nesta.

"I've just been musing on the vanity of all mundane pleasure. Here am I, nearly at the end of my tether, and what have I gained? Not even, to use a Chinese symbolism, an 'umbrella stick.'"

"Something more valuable than that, I hope?" laughed Cora.

"No, not even your allegiance."

"Am I not very kind to you?"

"Just as you would be to Pritz, or to any other troublesome dog, to keep it from teasing."

"What does all this prelude?" she inquired.

"Only that this is my last day, and I'm in a very dejected frame of mind. I'm off to-morrow, you know, to be 'coached' for my 'exam.' You ought to be very civil to me at the last, Cora."

"Haven't you the anticipation of our picnic to-day to keep up your spirits?" asked Nesta, laughingly.

"Fort bien, ma chère enfant!" By the way, talking of picnics, I met a footman from Longfleet Hall just now on the lawn, and he gave me this note for you, Nesta."

"Clara's writing! I venture to say she has written to say they won't be at the picnic to-day. It is an old trick of hers, promising to go to places, and then sending an excuse at the last minute."

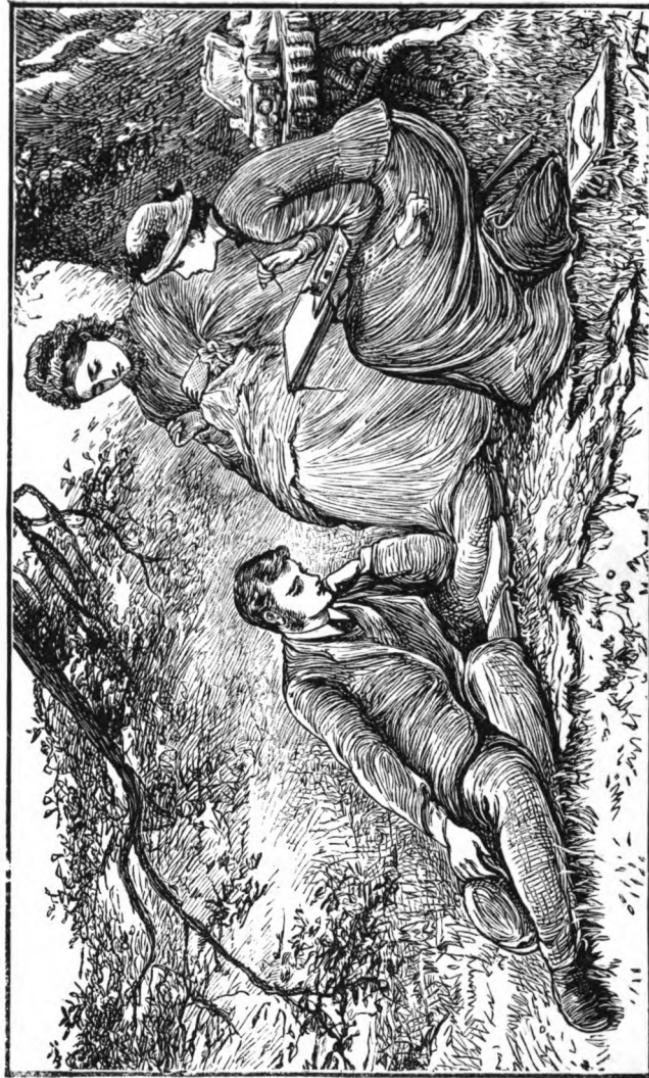
"Better open the note and see," suggested Fred.

"Here is just what I suspected. 'I am very sorry, dear Nesta.'"

"What excuse does she make now?" asked her brother.

"Oh, some people are expected from London, and they must stay at home to receive them. Such nonsense! Never mind, we shall still be a large party—twenty-five, without them."

They were going to Leightone woods, several miles beyond the far-famed gorge, to eat their luncheon under the pine trees, and afterwards to ramble about as they chose, admiring the prospect, hunting for nuts, or amusing themselves in any other way they most preferred. A wagon had already gone on



" RALPH WENT ON WITH A CLEAR ARTICULATION."

brush and colours—in this little book. What can be more appropriate for the present occasion than this?—

‘ Pleasant it was, when woods were green,
And winds were soft and low,
To lie amid some sylvan scene,
Where, the long drooping boughs between,
Shadows dark and sunlight sheen
Alternate come and go.’”

Ralph went on with a clear articulation, a musically tuned voice, and much feeling, to the end of the piece; then he darted off to some verses on “Nuremburg,” anon to half-a-dozen other poems, and finally brought himself up with a sudden stop, as he read—

“ Hours had passed away like minutes; and, before I was aware,
Lo! the shadow of the belfry crossed the sun-illumined square.’

Why are you looking at me, Cora, with that keen artist's glance?” said he, catching the full light of her lustrous eyes for the third time. I do believe you are painting my likeness.”

“ Don't move, please! don't, Mr. Ralph. Stay as you are, just for a minute or two more.”

Ralph lay obediently, looking into the pages of his book, but not reading aloud.

“ Thank you so much; that will do now,” said Cora, presently. “ This picture, you know, is for your mother,” added she, gravely.

“ May I have a glimpse ? ”

“ Certainly. I have finished the figures.”

to the meeting-place with the needful provisions, and the various guests were to assemble on Marleigh Grange lawn at eleven o'clock.

"A long, lazy day in the sunshine again! That will be delightful!" Cora exclaimed, when she heard of the intended excursion.

Most of the party were young, with a sprinkling of elderly people to act as *chaperons*.

Off they started, a gay little procession of carriages, dog-carts, and other vehicles, some of the gentlemen on horseback bringing up the rear.

The Squire offered to drive Olive and Nesta over to Leightone, and then he was going to dine with a friend in the neighbourhood.

The picnic passed off as most other gatherings of the same nature do. There was plenty of fun as the bright young faces met round the rudely-spread table-cloth, and ate, and chatted, and grew merry over their meal.

What were minor inconveniences to them? It did not matter in the least that the salt had got into the mustard, and that they had forgotten oil for the salad.

It is so easy to make young hearts happy; that is, if they have not been surfeited with false pleasures, or had their freshness sullied by contact with the hard, cynical teachings of false philosophy. The very fact of gathering together under the grand old trees is pastime to them, the breath of the pines is ambrosial essence, a pleasant jest brings forth a round of laughter, a favourite song evokes a chorus of mingling voices.

Of course, there were some of the party, such as Olive, Captain Rollo Fraser, and a few others, far superior to these simple amusements, and they conversed together, or listened in dignified composure to their light-hearted companions.

Charles McArthur was not one of these. He loved innocent merriment that had no taint of sin. The trill of fresh, silvery laughter from youthful lips was to him as the tune of the rippling brook by the roadside, or the glad chorus of summer birds in the woods.

Fred was in high spirits on that day. Perhaps he thought, as it was his last holiday, he would make the most of it. When called on to sing he began, a little out of tune—

“ My good blade carves the casque of men,
My tough lance thrusteth sure ;
My strength it is the strength of ten,
Because my heart is pure.”

“ Give us some more, Sir Galahad,” called out Jessy McArthur, but Fred assured her he could not recollect the rest, and started up, saying they were losing time, and that the best part of the day was nearly over.

He was soon the centre of a group of merry girls, Cora and Nesta amongst them. He enticed them to the highest points of hill and rugged rocks, where the best views were to be seen, and led them to the ruins of an old castle, about which he told such startling and marvellous legends that his hearers declared he was inventing them off-hand, giving

them some shreds and tatters of various nightmares with which he had been troubled.

"Well, girls, if you don't believe me, I pity you," exclaimed he, with princely condescension. "Now for the nuts."

He performed unexampled acts of daring in climbing the hedges and flinging down bunches of half-ripened fruit, which were nearly all shell and sepal, to his delighted attendants.

"A little more sun and a few weeks more time would have made the nuts all the better, my friends; but I cannot force Nature, and I give them as I find them," he asserted.

By-and-by, when the twilight began to creep up in shadowy places under the trees, Nesta allured Cora away from the rest, and said—

"There's a capital place for cranberries a little farther on. I gathered a lot last year. Do come with me, Cora, and try if we can find some now."

The two girls ran down the side of a hill, to a rather marshy, boggy place, strongly suggestive of frogs and toads, and there, sure enough, were numbers of the little trailing, shrubby plants, loaded with bright red fruit.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Nesta. "Pick away as fast as ever you can, and we may fill my basket. Sarah bottled those I took home last year, and we had tarts made with them—capital, with cream!"

"If we had more light we might make better progress. It is getting nearly dark," said Cora, stopping to look about some time afterwards. "And

there is Fred coming round the hill, leading Sultan and the dog-cart. Perhaps he is looking for us."

He *was* looking for them ; looking in rather an impatient frame of mind, it appeared, for he called out at once, in a loud tone of voice, and with a face grave as any judge—

" What a shame of you two girls to steal away like this ! But for me you might have been left behind. Olive and Captain Fraser have driven away ; so have the Wilmots and a lot of others. Nesta, Charles McArthur is waiting to drive you home with Ella Burns, and Cora, you are to come with me."

" Nesta was off, and out of sight in an instant, and Cora stood gazing at the high, oak-painted, highly-varnished, break-neck-looking, new dog-cart, that Ralph had bought for himself only a few weeks before at Brixleigh.

" Must I climb up into that ? "

" Of course you must, Cora ; all the other vehicles are gone. Step up quickly, please ; Sultan is growing impatient, like his master."

There was still the imperious tone and the inflexible countenance, so Cora did not argue the point any more. She placed her little, trim, Balmoral-booted foot on the step, and, with Fred's assistance, soon seated herself. He swung himself lightly up beside her, and they set off with a dashing and spirited start that made Cora exclaim—

" I hope Sultan is not going to run away with us."

"Not if I know it," said Fred, skilfully handling the reins, and turning into the high road.

"We are not returning by the way we came," said Cora, half an hour afterwards.

"No; we are going round by the edge of the common, on the higher road. We shall have a splendid view of Leightone valley by moonlight. Are you warm enough, Cora?"

"Oh, yes, thank you. I could hardly be cold on a night such as this. There is scarcely a breath of air stirring, and the moon is rising beautifully. How strange and dreamlike everything looks by moonlight!"

They reached the higher road ere long, and there, far below them, lay the large inland town of Leightone, the streets mapped out with gaslight, the church spires clear and distinct, as they caught the soft moonbeams, and the river that ran through the middle of the town looking as if turned to rippling silver.

The rumble of carts, the hum of voices rose to them, as Fred drew up Sultan for a minute's pause. It was a far-off peep of life and human activity, in vivid contrast to the lonely common, on the edge of which they were driving.

Cora was delighted; her artistic eye took in the strange beauty of the scene, and she called it a glimpse of an enchanted city, shut up for ever in an inaccessible valley.

"It was worth driving round a mile or two out of the way to see; worth even a little subterfuge, or rather stratagem, was it not, Cora?"

"I never used subterfuge or stratagem," asserted she, looking round at her companion, who was laughing to himself.

"But *I* did; and I'll tell you how. I overheard Master Ralph planning how he would drive you and Jessy McArthur home in the carriage, and I at once determined he should not have the two nicest girls of the party all to himself; so behold me at your side, and I expect Ralph was in a fine way when Nesta carried him news that you were off with me. He had to console himself with driving Jessy only. That is, if consolation was supposed to be needed in such a case."

Cora did not reply. In a moment her fancy had drawn a mental picture of Ralph sitting beside Jessy in the tender moonlight, talking as Ralph alone could talk, and she felt vexed with Fred, vexed and angry about the plan he seemed to think so very clever. But not a word or look should betray her thoughts on the subject, of that she was quite determined.

"I declare, I believe you are annoyed, Cora," said Fred, after a long pause.

"I think you might at least have consulted me before you carried out your stratagem, as you call it."

"That might have been to spoil it, perhaps. You would not have consented to drive with me, had you known Ralph was waiting for you."

"I had not the choice."

"There you are harping on that string again. No, I did not give you a choice, because I wanted so

much to have you with me on this my last drive.
Don't be angry with me, please."

"Did I say I was angry?"

"No; but I hear it in the tone of your voice. I read it in the expression of your eyes, though you are turning them away from me as much as you possibly can, and I have so much to say to you."

"I don't think too much talking does good."

"But I *must* remind you that I am going away to-morrow, and it may be years before we meet again. Promise to think of me. I shall not always be a poor cadet, and I want you to wait until I have the right to tell you all I wish. I want you to—
to—"

But here Fred's speech came to a sudden and unexpected ending.

They had been driving for the last half-mile through a densely-wooded plantation, from which the moonlight was almost excluded by the thick branches of the trees overhead. The road was broad, but much overgrown with grass and moss for want of traffic on it, and near the paling were huge masses of rubbish, left there by workmen who had been cutting down wood.

Fred, in the excitement of his conversation, did not notice one large heap near them. The wheel of the dog-cart ran up over it, and in an instant the vehicle was overturned, and Cora and he were thrown out into the middle of the road.

Sultan fortunately stood still, but the dog-cart lay a complete wreck; one wheel off, one shaft broken.

Of course, Fred's first thought was of Cora. He

rushed towards her, and grew almost frantic when he saw that her fringed eyelids were closed, her face white and still.

"She is dead!" he almost shrieked. "Cora, Cora, speak—speak to me once more!"

Her eyes slowly opened, she gave a deep sigh, and raised herself on her elbow.

"What is it, Fred? what has happened?"

"Oh, I am glad to hear your voice again! Are you hurt?"

"I don't think so, though I felt strangely just now. You are hurt, I see; there is blood streaming from your hand."

"Oh, that is nothing—only a slight cut against a stone," said he, flinging off the red drops. "What had we better do, Cora? We seem in rather an awkward dilemma. The dog-cart is a perfect ruin, and we are seven miles from home."

"Seven miles! Could we walk them?"

"Hardly, at this hour of the night. I've thought of a plan. Steve Barton's farm is only a mile from here, at the top of the gorge. If either you or I could get there he would lend us his chaise."

"I'm sure I could never find out the farm," said Cora.

"There is a short cut down through the plantation; I should not be long going, if you would have courage to remain here."

"Oh, I suppose I shall have courage!" said she, in a cold, apathetic tone. That strange faintness was coming over her again, and it was a trouble even to speak.

Fred unharnessed Sultan, tied him to the paling, spread a large shaggy gig-rug on the bank for Cora to sit on, and with a brief exhortation to "keep up her spirits," and not be timid, he darted, with rapid footsteps, down a narrow pathway through the plantation.

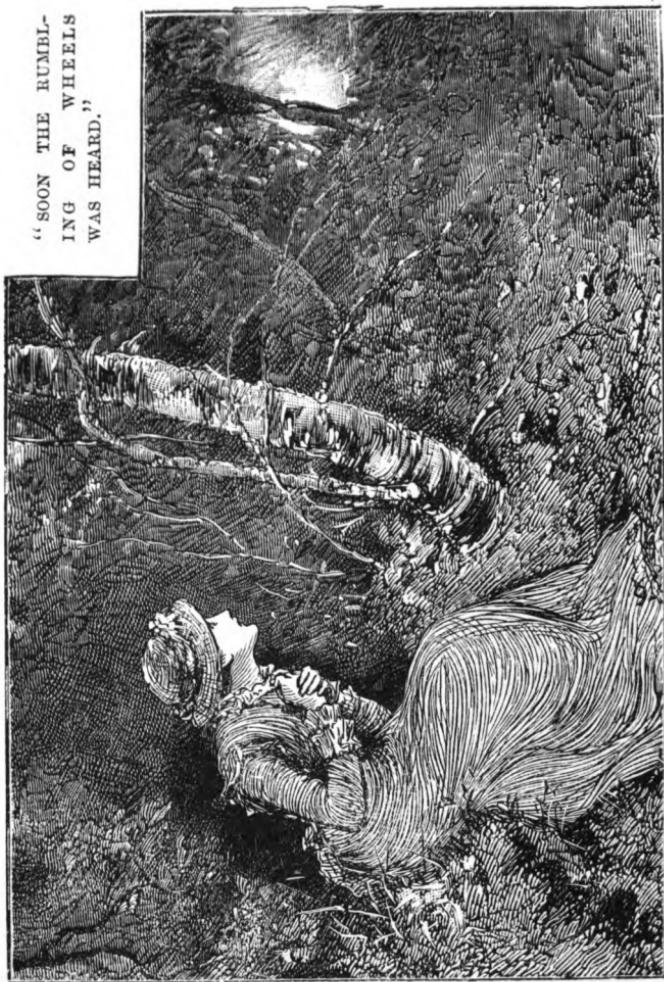
Cora scarcely heeded his departure ; she sat with her face buried in her hands, feeling half-dazed, half-numbed, and altogether unable to realise her position. How long she remained thus she never knew, but suddenly something startled her, and roused her to consciousness. A rabbit, or a rat, darted past her, rustling the dry leaves as it disappeared from view, and she looked round in wild terror. To be alone there in the gloomy plantation, beyond the sound of human voice, beyond the sight of human eye, struck terror on her senses with an intensity only to be accounted for from the shock she had received, from the tension to which her nerves were strung.

The place seemed full of mysterious sounds, faint but vivid ; the branches rustled, the leaves whispered, restless birds twittered in their nests, and she felt that all sorts of slimy creeping things and uncanny creatures must be abroad at that hour.

An impulse to shriek for help, to rush away, anywhere, came over her ; she shuddered, her brain swam, her knees trembled, and her heart gave wild, violent throbs.

To a girl brought up in the country, to whom Nature in all its moods is familiar, who is accustomed by night as well as by day to ramble in sylvan

"SOON THE RUMBLING OF WHEELS WAS HEARD."



scenes, and who deems a walk by moonlight with her young companions a very great enjoyment, no doubt these terrors would be called weak and silly.

But to Cora they were a frightful reality ; she almost felt as if she was going mad. Relief came at last in the form of a violent fit of crying, sobs rose quick and fast, and hot tears rushed forth, relieving her overtaxed brain ; her thoughts grew calm, and she felt that she could look around her without that horrid dread of—she knew not what.

Sultan was cropping away at the fresh herbage, delighted, no doubt, at his unexpected rest and grassy meal. A few pale stars were peeping out of the azure beyond the trees, and her thoughts went up to Him who dwells above the stars. She repeated softly to herself—

“Oh, blessed Jesus ! in Thy sight
The darkness is as noonday light ;
In dreary paths I need not fear,
For Thou, my God, art ever near.”

And the words had a meaning and reality that she never recognised before.

Presently she called Sultan by name, and smiled when the animal turned his head and looked at her with his large, mild eyes, as much as to say, “I know you are there—enjoy yourself, as I am doing.”

Soon the rumbling of wheels was heard, and Farmer Barton's chaise came in the opposite direction to that from which she had expected it to appear.

The farmer was driving, and Fred was sitting by his side.

He was at her feet in an instant, holding her hand, and looking into her face.

"Were you very lonely, Cora?"

"I am not lonely now, and I am very glad you are come," replied she, smiling a little, as she tried to evade his questioning.

The chaise was a comfortable one, and she was soon seated beside the good-natured farmer, who wrapped the rug around her, and called her a "brave young lady, sure enough!"

"I hardly deserve the term," said Cora, laughing. "I should be sorry to tell you how timid I felt at first."

Fred was meekly seated behind. He seemed in rather a thoughtful mood, for his words were few, as they drove along at a careful jog-trot pace. Sultan was tied to the back of the chaise, and the broken dog-cart had been pushed under the shelter of the trees, out of the roadway.

Great was the consternation at Marleigh Grange at the non-appearance of Cora and Fred. The guests at the picnic had not returned there, but had gone straight to their own homes, so it was only the family party who waited and wondered, framing all kinds of speculations as to what had become of them, and no two agreeing in the same supposition. That some untoward event had occurred they *all* decided.

The chaise drove in at the gates of the Grange just as the cuckoo clock over the hall table was chiming

half-past eleven, and just as Ralph, unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, was riding quickly down the lawn, determined to scour the country all round until he could gain tidings of the wanderers.

CHAPTER XI.

A JOURNEY.

CORA had a restless night, and looked so feverish the next morning that Mrs. Burges, who went into her room at daylight to see how she fared, sent off at once for Dr. Tomson.

The doctor examined her carefully, and said that no injury had been caused by the fall, beyond the severe blow on the head, and the shock to the system.

"A fortunate thing for you, young lady, that there is nothing worse the matter. You had a narrow escape from concussion of the brain, if not from a broken neck. Keep yourself quiet for a day or two, and you will be all right again."

Cora was glad of the rest and quiet prescribed for her. She felt that even the exertion of getting up and dressing herself would be a fatigue and weariness. It was nearly noon before she went down to the drawing-room, leaning on Nesta's arm.

Not that she needed the support of her friend, but

warm-hearted Nesta had been overwhelming in her attentions, and had been flitting about all the morning, alternately waiting on Cora and helping Fred to pack.

Not long had Miss Forest been reclining on the sofa before Fred appeared at the door. Seeing her alone, he came forward with rather a doubtful and lugubrious countenance.

"I suppose you won't speak to me, Cora?"

"Why not, Fred?" asked she, smiling, as she held out her hand.

"I didn't expect you would," he exclaimed, clasping her fingers. "What with the weight of ire my father has been pouring on my unfortunate head, and what with the bullying I have had from Master Ralph, I am quite in a lowly frame of mind, and I feel fully deserving of a snubbing from you."

"Was Ralph so very angry about his dog-cart being broken?" asked Cora, quickly.

"He did not seem to care about that, but he was furious about other things, no matter what now. Mother even was angry and sorry, and I believe that hurt me worst of all. She said I might have caused your death by my folly—might have killed you, Cora; and it makes me shiver when all points of the subject are brought under my notice. Do you still say you forgive me?"

"With all my heart, Fred."

"Then we shall part as friends after all. Cora, you have made me happier than I ever was in my life before. You have been nothing but kindness and gentleness to me, and wherever I go I shall think

of you. Will you think of me just a little in return?"

"Fred, I have told you before that I can listen to nothing of that sort. My friendship I give you, willingly, but I can promise nothing more. When you go into new scenes and see new people, you will soon forget me."

"Never, never! I shall never forget you!" His blue eyes filled with quick tears as he tried in vain to extort a promise from her. He was proving himself not the brave "Sir Galahad," with "strength that is the strength of ten," but an impetuous, hot-headed boy, who wanted the "moon," and was crying because he could not get it.

But they parted good friends after all. Nesta came into the room soon afterwards, and Cora was a little amused to see how quickly Fred dropped the sentimental and rattled away in his old style. He seemed quite to recover his spirits before he started on his journey, and waved back his farewells with a bright smile as he drove down the lawn on his way to the station.

"I was right; he will soon forget me," decided Cora. "By this day three months I doubt if he will even remember there is such a person in the world."

After Fred was really gone away everyone began to miss him. A gay, bright, lively spirit is always missed, at first, more than a grave, thoughtful one. Even those who had been vexed with Fred's nonsense, wearied with his frolicsome moods, or grieved by his instability of character, forgot all his faults, and joined in the general lament for him.

Mrs. Burges often spoke of him during the next week, and each time with a deep sigh. One afternoon she was more than ever lamenting his absence, wondering what the "dear boy" was doing, when Nesta burst into the room, fluttering an open letter in her hand.

"From Fred, mamma, and he writes in such glee. He finds himself better up in everything than he expected, and Dr. Hallwell says he is sure to pass, and he adds, also, the Doctor has an only daughter, about seventeen—the sweetest, prettiest little creature he ever saw. This is part of his description of her—'She is dainty and *petite*, with a clear, bright complexion, arched eyebrows, large, liquid grey eyes, and soft brown hair, that falls over her shoulders in wavy curls. We are great friends already, as you may suppose, from the chivalrous character of your devoted brother, FRED.'"

"Ah! I have been troubling myself about him without cause," said Mrs. Burges, quietly.

Ralph had been listening, with his head a little bowed, to the end of the letter; then he looked towards Cora with such a knowing, comical expression in his dark eyes, that she felt her cheeks crimson as she gave forth a merry little peal of laughter, in which they all joined.

"Fred's heart-wounds are soon healed," said Ralph, presently.

"Better for him it should be so. I am glad the 'dear boy' is enjoying himself," replied Mrs. Burges, gently, and they all felt she was right.

The last week at Marleigh Grange passed rapidly,

as time ever does when happiness speeds its wings. Each day seemed full of enjoyment, though of gaiety or excitement there was none. Dr. Tomson still insisted on Cora's being "quiet," and having as much rest as possible, so the extent of her excitement had been a few drives over the breezy common or through the shady lanes with Nesta and Ralph.

But they had all been so kind to her. She was treated with such a comfortable friendliness that she was more like a daughter of the house than a guest.

Mrs. Burges felt the strongest sympathy for the girl, and in the long hours they spent together in the quiet room, when all the rest of the family were out of doors, she often lured her to talk of her father, and of all she could remember of her life before she was sent to Westville Ladies' College.

Cora liked these conversations about her father, and often sketched out in words of intense earnestness the future she hoped still lay before her, when she should be her father's housekeeper and companion, as other daughters were to their parents.

"You don't think Mr. Forest has married again, do you, Cora ? "

"Oh, I am sure he has not, dear Mrs. Burges," she replied, with heightened colour and flashing eyes. "He would have told me, had that been the case. He always speaks of my mother with the fondest affection, and though I do not remember her, she must have been worthy of all his love."

"I daresay you are right, Cora ; and, remember, child, you must look on us as your friends, and, in whatever circumstances you may be placed, you



"SHE OFTEN LURED HER TO TALK OF HER FATHER."

have always a home here. Next to Olive and Nesta, you are my dear adopted daughter."

Mrs. Burges drew the girl towards her, and pressed her soft lips on Cora's glowing cheeks,

as though she were endorsing a solemn compact.

The last day of the vacation had come at last, and it happened to be the very day on which the "Penny Reading" at Brixleigh was to take place. From some reason or other the entertainment had been postponed some weeks beyond the date first fixed. Dr. Tomson prohibited Cora's taking any part in it or even going there in the crowd, with a very decided negative, much to her disappointment.

The school-boxes were packed, and a little family group were gathered in the drawing-room enjoying the bright, brief afternoon together. It was a pleasant scene on which the slanting rays of the sun fell. Mrs. Burges was putting a finishing touch to the little muslin dress; Nesta had a pretty scarlet mat in her hands, round which she was embroidering a wreath of white roses in beads and floss silk. It was a parting gift intended for Jessy McArthur.

Cora, on a low seat near Mrs. Burges's side, was knitting and listening to Ralph, who was reading aloud to them in the interval before the dinner-gong sounded.

He had been reading aloud a great deal to them lately, and his hearers had fully appreciated his exertions. Finding that, although Cora was well up in the usual routine of school literature, she was yet wholly a stranger to the works of many modern authors, poets, essayists, and writers of fiction, he—without professing to do so—had adapted his reading to her needs, carefully selecting what he was sure she would like.

And she had ever been ready to echo Longfellow's words :

“ Then read from the treasured volume
The poem of thy choice,
And lend to the rhyme of the poet
The beauty of thy voice.

“ And the night shall be filled with music,
And the cares that infest the day
Shall fold their tents, like the Arabs,
And as silently steal away.”

Well ! the last page was read and the book closed as the dinner-gong sounded through the hall. The meal had been ordered an hour earlier on this day, as Ralph was to drive Nesta over to Brixleigh. Olive had already gone there with her father, for they had been invited to meet a few friends at dinner at the Wilmots', and they were all going in the evening to swell the ranks of the audience at the entertainment.

Ralph came towards Cora a few minutes before they started.

“ I am very sorry you are not going with us ; one reason is, that people will be disappointed, for I promised they should have a treat in hearing you play.”

“ You should not make rash promises,” said Cora, laughing.

“ It was not a rash promise. When I made it, there was every chance of its being carried out, and but for Master Fred's blundering I suppose it *would* have been. Why don't you ask me the other reason I am sorry, Cora ? ”

There was a look in his grave face and questioning eyes that made her hesitate how to reply : so he went on.

" You will not try to guess ? Then I must tell you. I shall miss you more than words can say, miss you this evening, miss you out of my life. How is it that happiness lasts so short a time ? Our dearest ones are separated from us, as soon as we have learned to love their presence."

Still there was no reply. Cora stood at the window looking out at the garden now growing indistinct in the twilight.

" Do you not care that we are to be parted so soon, Cora ? "

" I do care very much," she answered, softly.

He caught her small delicate hand in his, and pressed it to his lips.

" This shall be our parting, our true parting ! To-morrow we shall say the farewell words before others, but they will be mere form then ; the bitterness of parting will be over, and we shall be looking forward with hope to meeting again. You will not forget me ? Promise that."

" Yes, I will promise," she replied, still in the same low, sad tone ; and then Nesta came into the room, ready dressed for her drive, and with a roll of music in her hand.

" Here is the duet you are to sing with Jessy ; mind you don't break down in the middle of it. Good-bye, Mousie ; I wish you were going with us. You are looking quite pale and grave, Cora, and ought to go to bed early, and have your first nap

~~She has not ever been ready to echo Longfellow's~~

~~—~~

- ~~The room from the measured volume~~
- ~~The power of thy silence~~
- ~~She reads in the solitude of the poet~~
- ~~The beauty of thy silence~~
- ~~She the night shall be filled with music,~~
- ~~She the hours that quiet the day~~
- ~~She like other tents, like the Arabs,~~
- ~~She silently steals away.~~

When the page was read and the book closed
 she hurriedly stumbled through the hall. The
 book had been returned an hour earlier on this day,
 because it was to bring Nessa over to Brixleigh.
 She was absent from home with her father, for they
 had come in just to meet a few friends at dinner at
 the Victoria, and they were all going in the evening
 to attend the balls at the audience at the entertain-
 ment.

Jane came towards Ora a few minutes before
 the start.

"I am very sorry you are not going with us; our
 reason is that people will be disappointed;
 promised they should have a treat."

"You should not make rash
 promises."

"It was not a rash promise;
 there was every chance
 but for Master P.
 to have been."
 I am sorry,

There was a look in his grave face and questioning eyes that made her hesitate how to reply: so he went on.

"You will not try to guess? Then I must tell you. I shall miss you more than words can say, miss you this evening, miss you out of my life. How is it that happiness lasts so short a time? Our dearest ones are separated from us, as soon as we have learned to love their presence."

Still there was no reply. Cora stood at the window looking out at the garden now growing indistinct in the twilight.

"Do you not care that we are to be parted so soon, Cora?"

"I do care very much," she answered, softly.

He caught her small delicate hand in his, and pressed it to his lips.

"This shall be our parting—true parting! To-morrow we sh—say the farew—ards before others, they v—were fo—, the bitterness of parting v—, and looking forward with ho—ing will not forget me?"

"Y—rom—died, still in the same—ne; sta came into the room—sed and with a roll of m—nd.

sing with Jessy; the middle of it were going with us. And grave, Cora, and have your first nap

over before we return. What will Mrs. Woodhouse say to-morrow, if I take you back looking like a ghost?"

Cora took Nesta's advice, and went to bed early, but she lay awake, watching for their return, thinking, if the truth must be told, very much about Ralph, and wondering whether the time would ever come when he would ask her if she had kept her promise. She did not feel the least uneasy now, though she knew Ralph was to sing duets with Jessy McArthur.

The next morning the bustle of departure began as soon as breakfast was over. Mrs. Burges took a tearful leave of the two girls, Olive a far more dignified one.

"I don't suppose you will see me again as Miss Burges; I shall be married when we next meet," she said, grandly, as she pressed a cool kiss on Cora's cheek.

"I hope you will be happy, Olive."

"Thanks. There is every prospect of it at present. I daresay you will be glad to get back to your school studies again after such a long holiday. Remember me to Mrs. Woodhouse and to Miss Winifred."

The Squire and Ralph both drove over to the station with the two girls, and there they found the Rev. Charles McArthur, peering through his spectacles at them, as they walked in at the gate.

He said he had been to visit a sick man in the neighbourhood, and could not resist waiting to see the train off.

So there was plenty of hand-shaking and public

leave-taking, as Ralph had surmised there would be. He only found opportunity for a warm pressure of Cora's hand, as he said, softly—

"Recollect you have promised not to forget me."

After the train started Nesta shed a few tears. What schoolgirl is there who does not indulge in the "luxury" of weeping when she is leaving a happy home to return to the realism of school desks, hard forms, sums, and lessons!

Not Nesta, at any rate. By turns she wiped her eyes and looked out of the carriage windows as long as the remotest glimpse of the trees of Marleigh were in sight.

Then she turned suddenly to Cora.

"I hope you have enjoyed yourself at Marleigh Grange, Mousie? Mr. McArthur has given me a book to read on my journey. I wonder what it is about? Something to improve my mind, I daresay. You won't mind my reading, will you? You won't be dull?"

No; Cora was not dull. Ralph's last words and his last look were subjects for crowding thoughts, that were half sweet, half dreamy, and altogether new. And she was still thinking when the train came to the end of the journey, and she saw the porter waiting for their boxes.

When they drove up to the door of Westville House the servant said Mrs. Woodhouse wished to see Miss Forest in the drawing-room before she took off her things; and would Miss Burges please go to the schoolroom as soon as she was ready?

"How d'ye do, Lucy?" said Nesta, smiling.

"Have many of the young ladies come back yet?"

"About a dozen of them, miss. They've been coming in as thick as bees all day."

Much wondering, Cora soon found herself at the door of the stiff, prim drawing-room, that looked more chilly than ever.

Mrs. Woodhouse was sitting at a table writing, and she came to meet Cora with a grave look on her face.

"I am glad you are come, though I have not any good news for you," she said, kissing her. "A telegram came to me last evening about your father."

"Is anything the matter, Mrs. Woodhouse?"

"He is ill, and expressed a wish to see you. The doctor who sent the telegram says you must not delay."

"Do you think he is very ill—in danger, I mean?" asked the girl, with a blanched face.

"I hope not, my dear, as there has been no further message. I replied at once, saying you would start directly you arrived from Marleigh. Now you must hurry off as soon as you have had something to eat."

"I could not eat a morsel. Please let me go at once. Oh, how dreadful it all is!" said she, trembling violently.

"Cora, you must be calm, or you will be very little help in the sick room. Sit down and compose yourself, my dear. You know the secret of true strength, and in times of trial seek it, my poor child. The train does not start for half an hour, so I will leave you, and bring you up some tea presently."

Cora never could quite remember how that half hour passed. There was a burst of quick tears, soothing words, and fragrant tea, and a string of practical directions for the journey administered by Mrs. Woodhouse. Regrets, many and gushing, from Miss Winifred, hasty adieux from Nesta and the other girls, and then she found herself rattling off to the station, with her boxes, just in time to catch the London train.

CHAPTER XII.

A SECOND JOURNEY.

THE Cora who journeyed towards London in tears and dire anxiety was a very different Cora from the girl who had just come up from Marleigh Grange with love dreams in her heart and a soft, tender light in her eyes. It seemed as though that rosy dawn of hope was altogether obscured by the dense cloud of agony that swept over it, just as we have seen the golden sunrise in the east suddenly darkened by a swift thunder-storm. But the dawning light is still there, and it will brighten and brighten to noonday clearness.

It was late at night when Cora reached London, and as she gazed out of the cab window with eyes that were weary with weeping, she had her first glimpse of the mighty city.

The roar of traffic, the glare of lamps, the never-ceasing noise of wheels, the crowds hurrying here and there, driving on as though a moment's delay would be fatal, the wilderness of houses, the miles of

gas-lighted streets, the glitter of flashing shop-windows, the dreary corners that told of direst poverty, the haggard faces, the wealth, the misery, filled her with wonder. Fascinated and startled, she watched the stream of life as it rolled ever on and on. In a dull, narrow street near Westminster the cab was drawn up suddenly, and the driver came to the door.

"This is the address you gev me on the card, miss. Six shillings to pay, please."

Cora nearly emptied her slender purse as she handed him the money—about double the lawful fare—and soon found herself standing in the long narrow passage of the house, with her boxes beside her.

An elderly woman, with black, beady eyes, black, curly hair, sharp features, wearing a brown dress, with a large gilt brooch and chain to match, stood beside her, keenly watching the pale, anxious face that was trying so hard to compose itself to calmness as Cora inquired—

"Is my father living here?"

"You are Mr. Forest's daughter, I suppose?"

"Yes, they sent to tell me of my father's illness; is he better?"

The words came out eagerly, and the woman shrugged her shoulders, as she replied—

"It's too soon to expect much betterment yet, but Dr. Morrison don't give up hope for all that."

"Has he been asking for me?"

"He did yesterday morning, and the doctor sent off a telegram at once. Your father hev been took worse since then, miss."

"Let me go to him; oh! let me see him," exclaimed Cora, darting rapidly along the passage.

Mrs. Evans overtook her at the foot of the gas-lit stairs.

"Miss, I couldn't let you into his room nohow, unless the doctor was here to give permission; but I expect him to call every minute. Come up to your father's sitting-room, please, and rest a little after your journey."

The words were kindly spoken, and Cora followed the woman into a large room on the second story that had two windows looking out into the street.

The gas was faintly turned on. She could see the apartment was half office, half parlour.

A tall book-case, full of ponderous volumes, nearly filled up one end of the room. A large table near was piled with bundles of papers tied with pink tape, and under it and beside it were black tin boxes, heaped one upon another, and endorsed in white paint with someone's name.

But the portion of the room near the fireplace, in which some dull red coals were smouldering, was fitted up more for everyday use.

The round table was covered with a crimson cloth. A sofa, also crimson-covered, and an arm-chair to match, were on either side of the fender, and crimson curtains were drawn closely across the windows. With the exception of these attempts at comfort, the room was large and dreary and cheerless. Not an attempt at ornament, or at the various little touches of taste and prettiness with which a woman loves to beautify and adorn a home.

Cora had plenty of time to notice all this, had she been so inclined, for Mrs. Evans left her alone for half an hour—a pause that seemed to Cora to be hours and hours of suspense.

Then the woman opened the door, and appeared bearing a tray in her hands covered with a white cloth, which she set on the round table.

"I've brought you a little refreshment, miss. Just a wing or so of a chicken and a cup of tea; please come over and take it."

"I am afraid I could not eat; but you are very kind to think of bringing me this."

"Don't talk of kindness, Miss Forest. It's my duty to try and be kind to your father's daughter. A good tenant indeed he has been to me. Nine years has he lived in my house, and never a hard word have I had from him yet."

"Nine years! Then papa has been with you ever since I went to Mrs. Woodhouse's school."

"That's the time, indeed! But you'll think it strange, I daresay, that I never knew Mr. Forest had a daughter until yesterday, when he was took bad, and then he gev the doctor your name and address. You see, miss, your father's a bit close and reserved in his ways. He don't tell nobody his affairs, and he don't trouble about theirs, except they're brought before him in the way of business—that alters the case, of course. Now try a bit more chicken, miss. Don't push away your plate; you've hardly eaten a morsel."

"Quite enough, thank you."

"You see, miss, I was left a poor lone widow, and

I get my living by keeping lodgers. Your father is my best tenant. He has this room, his chamber upstairs, and his office below ; and his name is on the doorplate. I've a French school-teacher living here also, and two young gents—City men. So, you see, with me and Sally, the house is pretty full. When I heard you was coming, thinks I, she'll stop here, for certain, the young lady will ; and I just got ready a little bedroom next mine. You won't mind its being rather small and very high up, will you, miss ? As I hadn't no orders on the subject, I did the best I possibly could."

"Thank you very much. I shall not mind the smallness of the room."

"Oh, I'm so glad of that. You'll find your boxes there, and everything comfortable for you. There's a ring at the hall door, and I'll be bound it is Dr. Morrison ! I'll soon find out whether you're to see your father to-night or not, poor, dear man !"

Mrs. Evans returned ere long, and beckoned Cora to follow her. Her heart gave a wild bound ; she felt her cheeks grow pale and cold as she went up the stairs, but she tried so hard to compose herself, that she thought she had nearly succeeded.

The corners of the large room were in shadow, but a ray of light from a small lamp on the table fell on the sick man's face. His eyes were closed, his face distorted ; a white, wet cloth was pressed to his brow.

A low cry broke from Cora's lips, but Dr. Morrison's warning hand was held up in a moment.

"You must be calm, young lady, if you are going to be your father's nurse."

"But he looks so dreadfully ill!" gasped Cora.

"He *is* ill—very ill, indeed."

"Oh, do you think he will die? Can he recover?" she asked, wildly.

"He will be saved if human aid can save him. That is, unless you retard his recovery by your excitement, and by giving way to your feelings."

"Pardon me, Dr. Morrison, the shock unnerved me. I am calm now," and she stood for awhile beside the doctor, looking silently down at the distorted face.

The doctor did not reply; he was apparently keeping as strict a watch on her as he was on his patient. Possibly the result was satisfactory, for he soon began giving her some practical instructions about the method of treatment during the rest of the night.

"You will stay with him, I conclude, and Mrs. Evans will be on the watch also. I will call early in the morning."

And so Cora's office of nurse began. After this, hour after hour, night after night, she was ever at her post, a vigilant attendant, ready to carry out the doctor's orders, ready to attend to his every direction.

Self-possessed, faithful, tender, and loving, she hardly ever left her father's side, and never complained of being weary, never craved for the rest her eyes so surely needed.

At first she had been shocked by her father's appearance, so different from the ideal she had cherished in her heart, so altered from the little

portrait she ever carried in the locket suspended by a thin black cord round her neck.

But now she had grown used to those twisted features, those poor, powerless hands. A tender pity mingled with her love. Her affection had grown deeper than ever.

Many a prayer that, if God willed it, her father might be spared to her, arose from her heart as she sat by the bedside, watching, waiting, and sometimes weeping, though she never let Dr. Morrison see her tears.

At last the time came when there was some improvement. The doctor saw changes that he called "hopeful." A more natural expression awoke in the face, and more vitality was visible in the thin, white fingers.

One afternoon Cora was sitting alone by the bedside. It was a foggy November day, and the dim light that came in from the street mingled with the rays of the lamp on the table. In the room all was silent as death; outside was the never-ceasing roar of a thousand sounds, mingled and blended into one grand universal murmur, deep as the voice of ocean.

All at once Mr. Forest turned his head on the pillow and looked towards Cora. She was on her feet in an instant, gazing down at him, and meeting the full light of his opened eyes. There was a rapt expression in them, such as she had never seen before. He half raised himself, as he exclaimed, in a tone of joy—

"Millicent! Millicent, my darling! is that you?"



"SHE WAS ON HER FEET IN AN INSTANT."

"No, papa, it is Cora, your daughter Cora," she replied.

He turned away, as if not comprehending, and was presently either asleep or had lapsed into unconsciousness again. Cora watched him with intense eagerness, recalling the tales she had heard of the

faint glimmer of reason that sometimes comes ere death seals up the mortal senses for ever. She told Dr. Morrison of the incident, and he smiled, and said he would wait until the next awakening of his patient.

Presently Mr. Forest opened his eyes calmly. He knew the doctor at once, recognised his daughter, and drew her towards him, as she pressed her lips on his.

There was a change for the better, and for a time it seemed as though his recovery was certain.

But as weeks passed on it was seen that Mr. Forest would never recover his full vigour of mind and body. As a broken-down, almost helpless invalid, he might perhaps linger on for some time longer, but his active work in the world was done; his overtaxed mind and body insisted on the rest he had once so grudgingly doled out to both.

All through the dreary winter—and it was an exceptionally long and dreary one—he still remained delicate, though he never gave up hope for himself.

"It is these English fogs and this humid English climate that keep me back," he said.

"Do you think so?" replied Dr. Morrison.

"I am certain of it. Once, when I was many years younger than I am now, I had an attack of illness, and was cured of it at Wildbad Gastein. I shall try the waters again in the spring. You are not hopeful about me, Doctor?"

"I think you are right to try every remedy in your power. No one would rejoice more at your complete

recovery than I should," replied he, evading a direct answer.

When the spring came, much to Mrs. Evans's disappointment, Mr. Forest gave up his apartments at her house, and removed the plate from the door.

She was sorry to lose her "good lodger," who for so many years had never given her a "hard word," and indeed had spoken but few words at all to her more than were absolutely necessary. She was sorry, too, to lose the "pleasant, nice young lady," who had always a smile for her, however much she might be anxious and heart-broken about her father, and who had taken to that little garret apartment next her own just as though she had been used to that sort of thing all her life.

Mr. Forest gave her some consolation, in the shape of a handsome present for her attention during his illness; also, he recommended another tenant to her rooms—a lawyer, to whom much of his business had been turned over.

In the month of May, when it was in the height of the season in London, when crowds of carriages and equestrians were passing up and down the "Row," when a rush of fashionably-dressed people were crushing each other to get a first glimpse of the favourite painting of the season at the Royal Academy, then Cora and her father bade adieu to the dingy street near Westminster, that was at once so grim and noisy, and where the sounds of the great thoroughfares near by came mellowed and softened by distance.

It was the height of the season down at Marleigh,

also—for the trees had donned their fresh green colours, the hedges were gay with flowers, fragrant violets nestled in their snug corners, the tender yellow of the primrose stars lit up the shady lanes, and the parent birds were singing their loudest, most jubilant songs.

Nesta Burges wrote long gushing letters to Cora, by fits and starts, whenever there were any news to relate. Lots of school gossip found its way into those closely crossed sheets. Miss Winifred was openly *fiancée* to the little German master, and they were so "awfully spoony," it was "such fun" to watch them.

"Fun!" of course it was fun to watch symptoms of the tender passion in persons of mature age, at least, so joyous youth always imagines; but wiser and graver thoughts will come in due time.

Nesta told of Olive's marriage to Captain Rollo Fraser—not a gay wedding, by any means, for the Captain was under orders for India, and her mamma could not bear much gaiety when she was so soon losing her eldest daughter.

Fred was expecting his commission, would soon be an officer, and he wanted so much to write to Cora in the Christmas holidays, but Nesta had interdicted such a measure. Ralph was still at Cambridge.

During the short passage across the Channel Cora's father was brighter and livelier than she had ever seen. He said the change of air was doing him good already; and leaning heavily on his daughter's arm, he paced up and down the deck until sunset,

apparently drinking in new strength and hope, as the steamer plunged her way through the light sparkling waves.

"A splendid passage, the wind in the right quarter," the captain told them as he stopped now and then to speak a word or two to the invalid gentleman, and as they landed he ran over to tell Mr. Forest that the passage had been a shorter one by some minutes than any he had made before that year

CHAPTER XIII.

A LONELY GRAVE.

AFTER their arrival at Wildbad Gastein Cora and her father spent their first night in one of the large hotels. It was crowded to its uttermost limits with visitors gathered from many countries, some of whom had come to try the waters; others for the mere purpose of enjoying themselves.

The smell of many and strange dishes and the odour of cigars were a burden and weariness to Mr. Forest, only equalled to the effect on his nerves of the buzz of voices in the saloon and the sounds of music and merriment that arose without ceasing from the hotel gardens.

"Another night in this place would kill me," he said, as Cora and he met at breakfast the next morning.

"Is it too noisy, papa?"

"Noisy! it is Bedlam let loose! But there will soon be an end of it. I will drive you to lodgings presently that will suit much better."

Cora was a little sorry to leave a scene at once so new and so animated. She had been amused watching the people from the windows—the natives, with their high-pitched voices and foreign appearance. Amused also in watching the strange gathering of visitors in the rooms within the house.

But she was soon dressed for the journey, and with no word of regret seated herself beside her father in the old, lumbering coach he had ordered. They drove along a delightful country road, through groves of almond, olive, and mulberry trees, through vineyards green with budding vines, and at last stopped before a large country house that in its day had, doubtless, been inhabited by someone of rank and consequence in the land.

It was now a farmhouse in the hands of Antoine Mylin and his wife Adelheid, and bore a strange look of faded gentility, of fine things put to mean and inferior uses. Pigs ran about the noble courtyard and rubbed themselves against the broken marble fountains. The stables were turned into cowhouses, and hens cackled from the weed-grown terraces.

Antoine came to the gate to meet the carriage, and seemed somewhat puzzled by Mr. Forest's friendly greeting.

"What! don't you know me, Antoine Mylin? Must I introduce myself afresh?"

The voice, more than the looks, seemed familiar to the old man; he smiled with a slow, meditative smile, and said, in broken English—

"I should say that it is the voice of Mr. Dugald Forest, but the looks——"

He was impatiently interrupted.

"Never mind the looks, Antoine! I have been ill, and have hardly recovered yet."

"Ah, yes! come to the 'valley of the Gastein' to lie beside *her*," he replied, solemnly.

"No, no, not yet, Antoine! I have come here to get better, I hope; to try the waters once more—they cured me once, you know. Have you lodgings for my daughter and myself?"

"Ah, is this the *petite*?"

"Yes, she is all I have in the world now. But have you lodgings, Antoine? I am wearied to death with knocking about, and I want to settle down as soon as possible."

"Adelheid!" called the old man; and a woman appeared in a short woollen dress, white apron, and high cap, and old as himself. She had shrewder senses than her husband, knew Mr. Forest at once, but began wiping her eyes, as she noted his altered appearance.

"So changed—I should not have thought it!"

"Years change everybody. Have you rooms for us, Mistress Mylin?"

Of course she had. Monsieur might have his choice of any in the house, and she would be proud to wait on him and on the *petite*.

They had a saloon to themselves, large and bare as a barn; and bedrooms that might have lodged nobility, but equally bare, save of mere necessaries.

But what did it matter in the golden sunshine, when floods of light and heat bathed the vast rooms? when the silent, tangled, weed-grown gardens were



"FATHER AND DAUGHTER WEPT OVER THAT MARBLE SLAB."

wreathed with many-coloured flowers, and the grapes hung rich and ruddy from the vines? They could get conveniences and carpets and luxuries when the chill winds and frosts of winter threatened.

One day Mr. Forest drove, with his daughter, to a small graveyard, near Hof Gastein, and there, amidst the carved crosses, wreathed with *immortelles*, he paused before a white marble slab. With a look of intense emotion he pointed it out to Cora. "Read that," he said.

Much startled, she repeated aloud, "'Cora Millie-
cent Forest!' Why, papa, that is my own name;
it looks as if I was buried there!"

"It is your mother's grave; you never knew her, child, but she was a tender, affectionate wife, gentle as she was lovely, and—and—I believe I broke her heart."

"Oh, papa, don't say that!"

"I fear it is too true, Cora." For a few minutes father and daughter wept over that marble slab. Cora dared not ask any questions; her father looked so ill and agitated, that she repressed at once the eager curiosity she felt to know his meaning. Better for her never to know than to distress her father by recalling to his memory circumstances so long past. But in the evening, when they were both sitting in the quiet garden, he told her of his own accord, and the circumstances he then related, with some other incidents he did not mention, may be detailed in a few words.

There is no part of the human life independent of the other part. The growth ever goes on. One

event influences many more. One feeling gives rise to succeeding feelings, and so, in Dugald Forest's experience, his earlier circumstances gave rise to the events of his future ; they were the secret force that affected his whole life, and gave a meaning and colouring to what seemed only reserve or eccentricity.

His wife was the only daughter of an English physician, a widower, who had settled at Wildbad Gastein. Numbers of his country people, attracted by the fame of the Gastein baths, and by the doctor's well-known skill, boarded at his house while their cure was being effected. Many of these real or imaginary invalids were of high rank—peers, statesmen, and ladies of title. Millicent, as her father called her, was a great favourite with the guests, she sat at the head of her father's table, and acted the hostess in a pretty, unaffected way. Her bright and joyous spirit was like sunshine amidst the rather dolorous atmosphere of the doctor's house. It happened she so fascinated some of the noble guests, that she had several offers of marriage far above her expectations as regarded rank and wealth. But she refused them all. Her heart was already given to the grave, thoughtful lawyer, Dugald Forest, a man thirty-six years old, double her age, and who lodged with Antoine Mylin.

Much to the surprise of everyone, and very much to her father's disappointment, she was married to Dugald.

Some months afterwards Mr. Forest went with his wife to stay at her father's house, and again Millicent took the head of the table, and acted

as mistress of the place, by her father's express desire.

Ere long, this became a source of trial to Mr. Forest. He idolised his young wife to such a degree that he would fain have had her whole attention ; he grew jealous of words that were not for him, and of smiles bestowed on these high-born English idlers who stayed at the house.

He remonstrated rather angrily, but Millicent, in the merriment of her innocent heart, laughed at his remonstrance, and told him in her artless way what was really true—that he was the only one in the wide world she truly loved.

Perhaps there never was a pair less suited to each other than Dugald and Millicent—the grave, earnest, reticent man, with no touch of humour in his nature, and the bright “butterfly” wife, who loved all that was lightsome, gay, and cheering. He mis-judged her in every way, called her vivacity by the hard name of “frivolity,” and her love for pleasant colours and pretty dress by the harsher terms of “vanity and weakness.”

Millicent was the spoiled pet and darling of her father's heart. Unaccustomed to contradiction and fault-finding, she grew impatient under Dugald's reproofs, and answered back with a bitterness foreign to her nature.

And so matters went on, growing worse and worse, until one day, in high wrath, Dugald went off to England without saying farewell to his wife, and when he arrived there wrote her a harsh, stern letter. Millicent did not reply to it, her father

would not permit her to do so, for he laid all the blame of disunion to the husband's charge, and regretted the day he ever accepted him as a son-in-law.

Weeks and months passed on. Dugald was too proud to write again.

One day a telegram reached him from Gastein, telling him of his wife's dangerous illness, and recalling him there.

He set off post haste, but was too late.

Millicent's pretty face, with closed eyes and drooping eyelashes, lay cold and marble-like on the pillow, and the nurse brought him a week-old atom of humanity, and told him it was his little motherless daughter.

The anguish that fell on his heart at finding his wife dead was like madness; his brain became fevered, a long, dangerous attack followed, during which he lay helpless and unconscious at Antoine Mylin's house, whither he had gone after Millicent's funeral.

For a long time he could not bear to look at his child; it seemed a living reproach to him for hardness and unkindness to its mother; though, he argued, he had never meant to be unkind, it was only his intense affection for her that made him jealous and exacting. Dr. Lennox offered to keep the child in his house—the only relic of his dearly-loved daughter. An old servant who had nursed Millicent in her babyhood was to take charge of it, and Dugald gladly agreed to this plan.

Until the doctor's death, about nine years after-

wards, poor little motherless Cora lived in her grandfather's house, left pretty much to foreign servants ; and then her father brought her to England, and placed her in Mrs. Woodhouse's charge, at Westville Ladies' College.

Mr. Forest's life became that of a lonely recluse, so far as society was concerned. He formed no new ties, and appeared to think the only thing in the world worth living for was the stern grind of perpetual work. He never spared himself—took no holidays, and not more rest than he could help, and at last the machinery had broken down from the long strain ; and again he had gone to Gastein to find, if he could, a cure from its waters.

Happy was it for Cora she had fallen into such capable hands as those of Mrs. Woodhouse. The child's education was entirely left to her. The only point on which her father expressed any interest was in the weak protest he occasionally made against his daughter being allowed to imbibe a taste for frivolity and vanity.

Those quiet afternoons in the garden of Antoine Mylin's house were soothing beyond measure to Mr. Forest's over-wrought and wearied mind. They were like rest after a long day's labour. The exertions and irritations of business were over, he could watch the sun go down in peace, could note the crimson and golden clouds fade before the grey twilight, and feel the repose of night was coming next, and that to-morrow would be as eventless, as free from the turmoil of life as this closing day had been.

This daughter of his was a new revelation to him. For the first time in his experience he began to find she was someone whose opinion was worth hearing, someone who could think brighter and better thoughts than his own were.

Her sweet face—so like her mother's—was yet of a loftier stamp, a more refined type; and in all her ways she seemed to aim towards a purer standard of rectitude than this world teaches with all its wisdom.

No one could be freer from pretension, less desirous of forcing her views on others, or more charitable to the erring than Cora was. Constrained by the love of her Saviour, she strove to follow the Divine example, and ever looked forward with faith to the reality of the other life that never ends.

Her father, who had seen so much of the world, and knew of its evils, its stains, and spots, soon recognised this golden web of religion underlying all her words and actions. He grew to respect it, and by-and-by longed to know more of its source and fountain.

So on these evenings Cora sometimes read aloud to him from the Book that tells the secret, and her voice was sweet and fresh as those of the birds that fluttered near the rustic seat, her cheeks bright as the half-wild roses that clustered near them.

By these means her father became possessed of the knowledge of the Gospel of Christ, and learned to trust and to love his Saviour. And in answer to his prayers, sweet peace was imparted by the influence of God's Holy Spirit.

They often walked to the little churchyard, and stood awhile beside the white marble slab, not talking much of the young wife and mother, whose name it bore, but thinking of her—Mr. Forest with regret, Cora with mysterious reverence, as she pictured to herself an ideal of the mother she had never known.

One afternoon they were returning from the churchyard through a lane bordered on either side with groves of trees, through the leaves of which the warm sunlight glanced quivering on the white road.

A stranger appeared in the distance, dressed in a light tweed suit and a low round hat—unmistakably English in his look and mien.

Cora, on whose arm her father leaned, looked towards the advancing stranger, and speedily brought herself to task.

"I must be growing fanciful," she thought; "but perhaps that is because I never see any one I know here, and I imagine every Englishman must be a friend. But I positively could imagine that to be Ralph Burges—his very walk, his face, his figure! How silly of me, to be sure!"

Yet her heart gave a much more rapid throb than usual, despite her protest, and she smiled to herself at her folly. But the figure came towards them rapidly, an answering smile on his face, and then Cora saw she was not silly at all, for it was Ralph, in very person, standing before her with outstretched hand. A bright flush rose to her face as she shook hands with him and introduced him to her father.

"This is Mr. Ralph Burges, papa, Nesta's brother—*you have often heard me speak of her.*"

"Yes, yes, to be sure! Have you come to try the baths of Gastein, Mr. Burges?"

"Oh, no!" laughed Ralph. "I don't think I have any need of the magical waters, for my health is of a robust kind, I am glad to say."

"You cannot be too thankful for *that*," retorted the invalid, solemnly.

"How did you find us out? It seems so strange," said Cora.

"Not strange at all. Nesta gave me your address before I left home, and I have just called at Antoine Mylin's house. He directed me this way—in fact, came along the road with me until you appeared in sight."

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE FOREST.

RALPH paused at Antoine's gate, but Mr. Forest invited him in to dinner.

"It is a treat to see English people, and to hear English news," he said, languidly.

Cora was slightly concerned about Adelheid's table arrangements with regard to this unexpected guest. Her father's dinner was always of the plainest, simplest, most frugal nature. Rich foods suited neither his tastes nor his health ; and of course Cora was always quite contented with sharing the fare he preferred.

But Adelheid proved herself equal to the occasion. She was proud to see her pretty young lady at last with someone who might, perhaps, prove to be her *fiancé* some of these days. So she brought out her finest linen, her old-fashioned silver and china, and invented dishes from cold chicken and scraps of cold meat on the spur of the moment that were of a relishing, appetising

nature, and that would have puzzled many an English cook.

After dinner Mr. Forest seated himself in his favourite chair beside one of the windows, placed his feet on a stool, and set himself to talk of "English news" with his guest.

But his walk had been an unusually long one on that day, and he soon grew weary of the last *on dits* in politics, the extent of the strikes, and the prospect of the crops, &c. His eyelids closed, and then Cora removed the plate of grapes from the small table beside him, and said—

"Poor papa is tired, and has gone to sleep."

Ralph led her gently towards the window at the other end of the room.

"You have not said you are glad to see me, Cora."

"Have I not? I *am* glad, all the same. What made you think of coming to this remote corner of the world?"

"Need you ask me? I wished to see *you*, and I followed you here. I don't like to lose sight of my old friends, you know. Are you angry with me?" he asked, looking down at her.

"Oh, no, I am not angry;" but she coloured, and turned shyly away to hide the consciousness that had come into her eyes.

"Tell me about Nesta. Is she at Marleigh Grange now?" she asked, presently.

"Yes; she is home for the holidays, and sent all sorts of messages to you—the chief of which was that she was sorry you could not be there with her.

Nesta will be lonely this time, for Fred is in Ireland, Olive in India, and you and I in this very room."

"It seems like a dream, does it not?"

"No, not a bit like a dream—it is a splendid reality! and I wish it could last for ever," exclaimed he, passionately.

Cora laughed at his impetuosity, and asked after the Miss Hendersons.

"Oh, they are 'greater swells than ever,' as Fred would say. We have not seen so much of them lately; they appear rather to have outgrown our tastes, for none of us really care for going to their elaborate entertainments. Perhaps it is pride on our part, as we could never return such magnificent parties."

"Are the McArthurs well?"

"Yes, and working harder than ever. Nesta has begun to help Jessy a little, that is, when she can spare time, but she does not like to leave 'the mother' too much alone."

It was pleasant standing there by the window, looking out over the quiet country scene, where everything seemed so familiar, and yet so strange; pleasant to note the warmth of word and look that flashed out every now and then, revealing how much more than friends they were to each other; pleasant to return to the chatty little gossip again that all the world might have heard.

Ralph had taken lodgings at Carl Hendrick's, a small house in the middle of the village street, and about a mile from Antoine Mylin's farm.

"Do you remain long in this part of the world?" asked Mr. Forest, as Ralph was taking leave.

"I hardly know; it depends so much on circumstances, but I do not return to England for a month."

Cora's father had arranged to drive the next morning to a forest some miles further into the country; he invited Ralph to go with them.

"That is, if you don't mind driving in a lumbering old coach, and going at the rate of three miles an hour," he added.

"I shall enjoy the drive under any conditions," replied Ralph, as he glanced at Cora.

The sun had reached to its highest glory, as, having left the coach in care of the driver at the verge of the forest, they all three walked into the sombre shade of the thick trees.

Mr. Forest was leaning on Ralph's strong young arm on this day, and stepping more briskly than usual, as he felt the firm support. Cora walked along beside them, with her folded parasol in her fingers, and a carriage rug across her arm.

The deep solitude of the forest was sublime. The canopy of leaves above them shut out the sunlight, and whispered and rustled, far as the eye could reach.

Nothing but leaves of all shapes and tints and sizes above. Nothing but shadowy trunks, and bare earth, and drifts of last year's leaves, and moss, and thin grass below.

The invalid soon grew tired, and looked for a resting-place. In a wooded hollow lay a blanched trunk of a fallen tree, and on this Cora spread the rug to

form a rural seat. There was room for them all, and they sat and talked, while a noisy spring of water babbled away, a short distance off, with a lively, rippling sound.

"Have you heard the legend about the waters of Gastein?" asked Ralph, presently. "No? Then I will tell you. A poor wounded stag, trembling and bleeding, had nearly been hunted to death by a pack of merciless hounds, and by a pack of still more merciless hunters. In wild desperation, the creature leaped into the stream; the hunters raised a shout of triumph at having secured their prey, for they knew well enough the exhausted animal would never have strength to escape. But, marvel of marvels! to their astonishment, the creature reached the other side of the river, sprang out refreshed, healed of its hurts, and as swift and vigorous as when it was first started on the chase. This wonderful story soon spread about. People began to try experiments in the stream. Those who were weak plunged into the waters and found their strength return. Those who suffered pain cured their ailments by a dash of the pure liquid. Those who had been guilty of crime—and the case was not unusual in those remote days—and were heart-broken in consequence, were restored to peace when they tried the waters."

"Now, now, Ralph—that is going too far—only one stream can cure the broken heart, broken through sin; and that stream is *not* the river of Gastein, nor does it flow from any earthly source," said Cora, gravely, as she looked up at Ralph with her sweet, serious eyes.

"I know, I know!" replied he, softly; "I am but giving one version of a silly, but perhaps a figurative legend."

"I hope the Gastein waters may cure me, for I am in sore need of a remedy," whined the invalid. "I am but a wreck of what I once was; my hands are so weak, that penning a short letter is weariness to me, and I used to write so much! My eyes fail me, and I can hardly get through the page of a book; and my memory is nearly gone! Things that happened years ago are clear as possible, but what Antoine told me yesterday is a blank! Cora must be eyes for me, now, and amanuensis, and prompter and guide! What should I do without my daughter? Anyone who would try to steal her affections from me would be a thief—yes, worse than a thief!"

Mr. Forest finished his speech in a harsh, smothered, excited whisper, as if to himself; but Ralph heard every word, and he looked round to see if Cora had heard also, but she was stooping down, removing a bramble from the rug with the point of her parasol.

Somehow, the wood grew sombre just then. Perhaps a dense cloud was passing over the sun, or a chill wind might have begun to blow up from the north, and they all agreed it was time to leave the cool, dewy atmosphere that had suddenly become so oppressive.

Mr. Forest soon recovered his spirits as they drove on through the deep sandy road with vineyards on either side, and through the hamlet, where the people were joyously holding their annual feast.

The sounds of music came floating up to them from scraping violins, played with more vivacity than skill; and a group of young girls and boys, in holiday costume, were dancing merrily in the daylight.

The driver stopped for a few minutes, and Mr. Forest leaned forward, listening and smiling.

"‘Music has charms,’” quoted Ralph, as he listened also. “Do you practise much, Cora?” he inquired.

“How can I? I have no piano, and I hardly know whether there are such instruments in this part of the world; at any rate, I have never seen any.”

“You lose a great treat, Mr. Forest, in not hearing your daughter play. I shall never forget how much she charmed us at Marleigh Grange.”

“Do I lose a treat? Perhaps so; it never occurred to me to inquire whether Cora was musical in her tastes, or not.”

“Oh, papa, what would Mrs. Woodhouse say at your doubting my skill? She would say, perhaps, I ought to know how to play a little, as I had been at Westville College more than nine years,” retorted Cora, with a merry laugh.

“You might have been at Westville College nineteen years and yet not have been able to play with more taste than such as one grinds tunes out of a barrel organ. I hate mechanical playing, and I have been told most schoolgirl performances are of that order.”

“Cora has nothing mechanical about her performance, Mr. Forest,” retorted Ralph, with some im-

petuousness and a little temper. "Her playing is exquisite, correct as science can make it, and eloquent with taste and feeling."

"Oh, Ralph, how can you?" laughed Cora.

"We shall see—we shall see!" replied her father, with a grim smile.

Several days afterwards, when Cora returned home from a walk with her father, she saw something new and strange in the saloon, and it was a minute or two before she could fully realise what it was.

A handsome new piano stood in the middle of the room, beneath it a bright Persian carpet, and over the windows, closely drawn, were substantial, green rep curtains that hung in folds to the floor.

"Oh, papa, what is all this?"

"A surprise for you, Cora; I myself want to hear you play, then I shall be able to judge if Mr. Ralph Burges is as impartial as he pretends to be. I was sending off for a winter parcel, to make the room more snug for the coming cold season, and I included a piano for you. I see Adelheid has already arranged the articles according to her own taste."

"We will soon alter that," laughed Cora; and, throwing off her hat and gloves, she seated herself at the instrument, and began running off brilliant scales and striking chords to test its power.

"Ah! it has been tuned, I hear. I ordered them to send a man with it who could put it in order. The tone seems good," said Mr. Forest, listening with a critical ear.

That evening, after dinner, Ralph came in. He always spent his evenings with them, and Cora

played for them both. The old saloon echoed with rich melody, such as had never been heard there before, not even in those days of grandeur, when a count and countess of high degree held court there, before the château had degenerated into a mere farmhouse.

Ralph and Cora sang duets together; for the former made the discovery that the young lady could sing, and had a sweet, sympathetic soprano voice, not of great compass, perhaps, but it was fresh and clear as a young lark's carol.

"Why did you never sing for me before?" he asked, in a tender whisper, as he turned over her music.

"Because you never asked me. You had Jessy McArthur in those days, and did not want poor me," she retorted, archly. "How do the Penny Readings get on?"

"They have been a success, and I think are answering the purpose for which they were intended. Brixleigh lads and lasses are fond of music, and the place is always crowded. We talk of building a larger hall some of these days."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Mr. Forest, who never liked to lose a word of the conversation.

The subject was explained to him, and he handled it from his own standpoint of experience.

"Ah! yes. Philanthropists try all ways of improving the masses, and it would be well if right judgment actuated their plans. Some have urged more holidays, less thrift, more amusement, shorter hours,

and higher wages, and have grieved to see the growth of intemperance, the waste of means, the loss of trade, the ruin of masters. You do well, Mr. Ralph Burges, to try and elevate the taste of your Brixleigh lads and lasses, and no doubt the improvable will be improved. But there is in every town a vast hopeless under-strata of rubbish and dregs which no teaching will make better, no attempts reform." His voice had sunk into the low despairing tone it sometimes assumed.

Ralph answered brightly, with a flash in his dark eyes ; he also had studied the subject.

" Don't talk of hopeless, Mr. Forest. We are told to look for 'stones' amongst the 'rubbish' ; and these 'stones' may be hewn and fashioned and made fit for the Master's use."

" Yes, yes ; I would not limit your attempts, nor discourage your hopefulness. But I have had much to do in the police-courts in modern London, and my heart has often grown weary with watching the never-ending flow of sin and crime that rolls ever on and on into impenetrable darkness. Why is there so much evil, so much misery in this world of ours ? What is the true remedy ? How can it be stayed ? These questions always make me feel wretched. Cora, play something, my dear."

She began at once a quaint, old psalm—half-forgotten, no doubt, by many people in these days of ours ; but in various metres, in prose and verse, the true meaning must reverberate through all the ages. Nothing new can supersede it, for no new revelation has been given.

“ Only His grace can save ;
Christ's blood was spilt.
Sinner, His mercy crave,
And the atoning wave
Cleanses thy guilt.”

“ Time and tide wait for no man” is a saying true as it is trite, and the hours flew all too rapidly for Cora and Ralph. Their last evening together had been a pleasant one, though the precursor to a long, sad parting.

They understood each other fully now. No more doubts in hearts devoted as theirs were. Young and happy in their golden dream, it sufficed them, and they had no dread of the future.

But the last morning had come, and with it a sudden change of weather. Quick heavy showers had fallen during the last few hours, washing the dust from the leaves and grass by the roadside, and making them bright and fresh again.

Cora watched the opportunity when the rain cleared off, and ran out into the garden to gather some flowers for the saloon vases. She did not expect Ralph for an hour or two yet, for she supposed he would finish his packing first, and devote the remainder of his time to them.

Great was her surprise when she saw him emerging from behind a grove of laurels, and coming down the garden with a rapid step. She went towards him, holding the flowers in her hand—a welcoming smile on her lip, a glad light in her eyes ; he had come so much sooner than he was looked for. As he drew

nearer, she saw his cheeks were pale, the expression of his face disturbed.

"Cora, I have come to say good-bye."

"What is the matter, Ralph? What has happened?"

"I have been foolish, that is all! I asked your father permission to woo you as my wife—said we would wait any length of time, but he flew into a passion and flung such words of scorn and reproach at me, that, had he not been *your father*, I would have answered him back with words bitter as his own."

"I am glad that you did not do that, Ralph," she replied, her cheeks white as his own.

"I cannot leave you like this, dear Cora! We love each other, let us part engaged lovers—promise to be mine."

He had drawn her towards him, and for a moment her drooping head rested on him, her tear-wet cheeks were pressed on his shoulder, as he persuaded her eagerly to promise, only to promise, to be his.

"We can wait for years and years, Cora; but let us have that hope to cheer us on."

"I cannot promise, Ralph. Without papa's consent I can promise nothing."

"Not even to write to me?"

She shook her head.

"How can I go through the years without you? What is there in the world to make up for your loss?" he asked, passionately.

Poor Cora was weeping silently. She could not



“ ‘I AM GLAD THAT YOU DID NOT DO THAT, RALPH.’ ”

give him hope, for she had none herself in this matter.

Presently a step was heard coming down the garden—a noisy step, it seemed. It was Adelheid, coughing, fussing, pulling at the branches, and calling. The good woman had a shrewd suspicion of what was going on. She had heard Mr. Forest's raised voice ringing through the saloon, had seen Ralph rush off to the garden with signs of disquietude in his countenance, and she thought it must be something about Cora; what else could disturb the handsome young *Anglais* and the young lady's father?

Adelheid Mylin had a womanly sympathy with fond lovers; she had not forgotten the days when old Antoine wooed her in that pleasant little cottage amongst the vineyards and cornfields near the broad Danube; she remembered the merry dances they had had together on the hamlet green, and the long, patient waiting that had come afterwards, while Antoine went with the army. Antoine was young then, and she was pretty—well, perhaps not *that*, but she was young also.

And so she felt for Cora and Ralph, who were doubtless saying the last, fond words before parting, and she did not wish to take them by surprise.

So she began shouting out in her shrill voice when half-way down the garden walk—

“Mees Forest! Mees Forest! your father dose want you, ples.”

Adelheid prided herself on her good English.

“I must go,” said Cora, moving away.

“My darling!” exclaimed poor Ralph.

"Remember *you* only shall be my wife. Never will I speak of love to any other woman, and your lips alone shall set me free from this promise!"

Cora did not reply. She could not, for her tears were falling thick and fast, and she only just managed to falter—

"Good-bye, Ralph."

He caught some of the flowers from her hand—a Provence rose or two.

"They say the waters of Gastein make flowers unfading. I will bathe these in the stream, and keep them for your sake," said he, as at last he turned away from the weeping girl. One of the rosebuds fell from his fingers as he took them, and poor, foolish Cora kept that bud, and dipped it in the waters on the first opportunity, but she found it faded and shrivelled in her desk years afterwards!

CHAPTER XV.

ADIEU TO GASTEIN.

MR. FOREST had been sorely vexed when Ralph Burges asked his daughter's hand in marriage. True, when the young man first arrived at the valley of the Gastein, a suspicion that he might have followed Cora there had arisen in his mind, and he had thrown out one or two pungent hints that might have dashed the hopes of any less sincere suitor.

But, as time passed on and Ralph seemed not crushed by these hints, but continued a bright, cheerful visitor, attentive to the father as well as to the daughter, these suspicions passed away from Mr. Forest's mind. He enjoyed Ralph's company, liked leaning on his strong, manly arm during their rambles abroad. He liked the musical evenings; liked also to argue with Ralph, deeming his intellect clear, his wit sparkling, his judgment worthy of attention. So the offer of marriage had come like a sudden shock, and the irate father had said many

bitter things, far more bitter and cutting than he really meant them to be.

And now he was seated in his arm-chair, waiting impatiently for his daughter, with many signs of disturbance in his appearance. His face was flushed, his eyes restless, his hands trembling, as they rested one on each elbow of the chair. His footstool was flung into the middle of the room, his cushion on the floor.

Cora entered the room like a drooping lily, her cheeks white, her soft dark eyes tremulous with the grief to which she had been giving way, but she was trying hard to be composed and calm.

She picked up the cushion, fixed it in its place at the back of the chair, and drew the stool into its position, but in an instant the cushion was on the floor again, the stool dashed into distance by an impatient crimson morocco-slipped foot.

"I don't want your services, now you are going to forsake me, and marry Ralph Burges," exclaimed her father, in a fretful, peevish voice.

"I am not going to marry Ralph, papa."

"But you are engaged to him, and will be thinking more of his letters than of me. You will grudge every hour spent away from him," he whined, pitifully.

"Indeed, indeed, papa, you are mistaken! I am not engaged to Ralph, and shall neither expect his letters nor write to him."

"Is this really true, Cora?" The question came in a firmer tone.

"Quite true, papa!"

more firmly bound than heretofore in a closer, more perfect union of sympathy and love.

After Ralph's departure, time passed on uneventfully. Weeks and months rolled away, and still Mr. Forest grew no better. The baths were *not* curing him in the least, but still he liked the quietness and seclusion of the place, and had neither the wish nor the energy to leave it. He was happy with his daughter; while she read to him or played to him he was satisfied, and the great, bare farmhouse of Antoine Mylin's was more like a home than any he had enjoyed before, except, perhaps, during the early part of his brief married life.

Cora and he rambled about along the roads or among the cottages. Sometimes they stopped to talk to the simple-hearted people, and showed an interest in their joys and sorrows. Cora knew German well, and could thus converse freely with the trim, neat, homely mothers about their little "Minchens" or their infant "Bäbelas," and many "*Ich küss die Hand, gnädige Fräulein*," greeted her, as she stood with her father at the cottage doors.

Two years had passed, and one afternoon in mid-winter Cora was sitting as usual with her father in the saloon.

It was bitter weather; snow hung on the heads of the forest trees, and the roads were hard and frozen. A keen north wind blew down the road, wailed and shrieked round the old farmhouse, and penetrated through every crevice of door and window. A large, ugly stove kept the room warm, and the curtains were closely drawn. Still Cora shivered, and she

wished more than once she had the power of transporting her father and herself to one of the comfortable homes of England.

Oh, for a room lighted with a glowing coal-fire, the ruddy flames dancing in and out of the bars ! Oh, for a really well-furnished, cosy bed-chamber for her father, where he could enjoy the warmth he really needed ! True, many "winter parcels" had been ordered from Salzburg. Furs and rugs and carpets had been supplemented to Adelheid's store of conveniences, but still the keen air crept into the house.

Even still more than for an English home Cora wished for an English physician—Doctor Morrison, for instance—someone who would tell her the reason her father was growing every day weaker and weaker. He never went out to walk or drive now ; even walking across the room wearied him. Doctor Leevig, a German doctor, came to see him every week, but he only told her not to be uneasy ; "it was nothin' ! nothin' !"

What would become of them both in that foreign place ?

Cora looked over at her father with a sigh. His face was ghastly pale, his figure shrunken and bent, and, with his chair drawn near the stove, he was sleeping heavily. She listened to his loud breathing, and then wearily began to notice the various noises in and out of the house.

Adelheid was scolding Minchen, the little servant-maid, for some neglect of duty ; her shrill, sharp voice rang through the kitchen. Antoine was lum-

bering to and fro at the back door, with pails and buckets—calling the fowls and feeding the animals. Presently, Minchen, to show her spirits were not altogether crushed by the chiding she had undergone, broke out into a strain of melody, singing in a dreary tone some German chorale.

Adelheid came into the saloon with tea and some almond cakes she had made for the young English lady. Cora generally held a consultation with her every day about Mr. Forest's health, and now she said—

“I think papa seems rather worse than usual, Adelheid.”

The woman stepped lightly across the room, and glanced down at the pallid cheeks and drooping figure.

“He is not looking well, mees; we must have the doctor here to-night.”

“Could Minchen run and fetch him at once?”

“That girl! Ah, no! she would spend hours gossiping with Hans or Carl or Frederick. She is surely an infliction for my sins, but, being Antoine's cousin, I have patience. Antoine shall go himself as soon as the cattle are shut up.”

This time Doctor Leevings did not say it was “Nothin', nothin'!” He looked grave, and helped to get his patient to bed, and gave him potent remedies. But there was no rallying power. The beginning of the end had come, and Mr. Forest rose from his bed no more. But even during the last few days that intervened before his death, his mind was calmed and soothed, and even happy. His interest in earthly

things had passed strangely away. Feeling his own helplessness, he trusted wholly in the merits of his Saviour.

Poor Cora was half distracted as she looked on the cold face, so strange and yet so familiar. She had never seen death before, and the mysterious calmness awed her. She remained kneeling, sobbing, trembling by the bedside, until Adelheid came, and almost by force removed her.

Then the necessity for action roused her from her bitter grief.

Frau Leevig, the doctor's wife, a notable, clever woman, with gentle grey eyes and a prompt manner, came over to offer her services and to cheer the poor English girl, who had no relatives in the place.

She recommended the best shop at Salzburg where mourning could be bought, advised about the making of the sombre garments, helped to arrange about the funeral in German fashion, and was by Cora's right hand as she stood by the open grave and saw her father laid beside his long-dead wife.

After the funeral Cora, following directions her father had left, wrote to his solicitor, telling of the death. Also, by the same post, she sent a heart-broken epistle to Mrs. Woodhouse, saying how desolate she was, and entreating her to find lodgings for her at Westville, that, during her time of sorrow, she might be near friends she loved.

The two answers came to these letters much about the same time. Mr. Elder, the solicitor, enclosed a copy of her father's will, and advised her coming to London at once. Cora was sole heiress of her

father's property, and the greatness of it startled and amazed her. It had never even entered her thoughts that Mr. Forest was a rich man. She believed him to be quite the contrary. Mrs. Woodhouse had long ago impressed the idea of his impecuniosity on her mind ; and, from her father's reticence about his affairs and his frugal mode of living, she never had any reason to change her first impression.

But it was not marvellous that Mr. Forest had amassed a large fortune. He had given the best of his days to money-making.

A shrewd, capable, clever man where business was concerned, his advice was sought on all sides, and he was eminently successful in that branch of his profession he made especially his own.

During his many years of prosperity he never spent a tithe of his income, and now the accumulated wealth was heaped on Cora. She found herself a rich heiress.

Mrs. Woodhouse's letter to her old pupil was full of love and tender sympathy. She said Winifred (now Mrs. Zillner) would be delighted to see her, and to share her home with Cora.

Hers was a large house, situated not far from the school, for both Herr Zillner and his wife still taught the young ladies as usual. Though they had married, their school duties went on the same as ever.

And so ere long Cora bade adieu to the "valley of the Gastein"—not for ever, as she told the weeping Adelheid.

"I will come again, for there are two graves I

shall sometimes like to visit, and I will always stay at your house if you have room for me."

The old woman's heart was made glad when she found that Cora would not remove the new things that had been bought for the rooms. Her piano was the only article she took to England, and with that she would not part, for she said—

"It was dear papa's own gift to me."

CHAPTER XVI.

WINIFRED'S HOME.

MRS. ZILLNER had a fine opportunity for exercising her refined taste in fitting up her bridal home, and she did not neglect the opportunity. The house was a high, narrow one, the front windows looked out on a trim grass plot, and from the back windows there was the view of a larger piece of ground, in which were formal garden rows, quaint alleys, a stucco fountain, one or two symbolical groups of fauns and dryads in the same material, and some fine specimens of clipped box-trees.

The drawing-rooms—for there were two, divided by a heavy-fringed curtain, which could be drawn back at pleasure—were marvels of Winifred's skill. The floors were covered in the middle with Turco-Persian carpets, the borders of plank beyond them were puttied and stained a dark hue, the walls were partly painted, partly papered in sage-green, dead gold, and browns; the ceiling was a paler tint of the predominant sage. The chairs were Windsor,

painted black and touched up with dead gold ; clear muslin antimacassars, made like bags, capped the backs of the chairs, and from them hung bows and streamers of sage, gold, and dark claret ribbon. The latter colour matched the curtains, which were made of stuff, alternate widths of sage-green and dark claret bordered with dead gold.

The piano was turned with its back to the middle of the larger room, and on this back a more than usual degree of ornamentation had been expended. On a claret velvet background were hung china plates of undoubted antiquity, and small water-colour paintings ; a fringe of dead gold and claret finished off the design.

In one corner of the inner room was a large folding screen, also of the prevailing tints, and on it were painted reeds and rushes, water-hens and storks.

There were blue tiles round the fire-grates, tiles within the circuit of the fender—and it was near one of these high grates, between the bars of which a fire was doing its best to sparkle, that Mrs. Zillner and Cora were seated on Windsor chairs on the evening the latter arrived at Westville. Mrs. Zillner wore a chocolate costume, trimmed with a broad embroidered Greek pattern. Cora, in her simple mourning dress, fitted tightly to her figure, had no ornament except a jet chain, that bore the cherished locket with her father's likeness. Her soft brown eyes were still tearful and sad, for she had been telling of those last days in the Gastein valley, and the subject was inexpressibly painful to her.



“ HE STROKED HER HAIR SOFTLY.”

He turned towards her with that lurking suspicion in his looks that had been the bane of his life, and met the full glance of her sweet, truthful, honest eyes, tear-stained though they were.

"Bring me my stool, Cora, and pick up my cushion. The chair is uncomfortable without it."

Cora brought over the stool, and seated herself upon it, looking up into her father's face.

"Pardon me, my dear, for misjudging you. I was angry with Ralph just now, and angry with you, but far more angry with myself; because during long years I too little valued a daughter's love, and have left others to win her affections. Cora, my darling, much as I deserve to lose you, do not forsake me now."

"I will never forsake you, papa; you shall have me always."

He smoothed her rich dark tresses with his thin fingers, and pressed his lips on her cheek.

"Dear child, you make me happy again. If these baths cure me we will go to England, and find our home there. You shall live where you like—have servants to wait on you, and friends to visit you, and we will enjoy life together; but—but—if there is no cure for me, stay with me to the last. Cora, don't ever leave me, darling."

"I never will, dear papa."

Her head rested on his lap, and he stroked her hair softly.

There had been a pang of bitterness in the father's heart, a throb of regret in the daughter's; but the estrangement between them was over now—they were

The Greek legend of the blind King Oedipus, who was so fondly nursed by his beautiful daughter, Antigone, the English legend of King Lear, and his faithful daughter, Cordelia, have had their counterparts through all the ages—and perhaps not often more faithfully than in the tender, self-forgetting love Cora Forest had for her father.

By-and-by Winifred changed the subject by asking if she had heard from Nesta Burges lately.

"I have never had a word from her for nearly two years. She did not answer my last letter, and I have wondered so much at her silence," replied Cora, as a soft glow mantled her cheeks.

"Poor child! I suppose she had not the heart to write." Mrs. Zillner's words came out with a deep sigh.

"Why do you pity her? What has happened?"

"Oh, have you not heard, Cora? Her father's death was very sad, caused altogether by the shock."

"What shock?"

Mrs. Zillner moved uneasily on her Windsor chair and looked round at Cora pathetically.

"Oli dear! Does it fall on me to relate the wretched story?"

"Remember, Mrs. Zillner, I have heard nothing of the Burgeses for a very long time. Do tell me what you mean."

"It was all through that smash of Henderson's bank—Henderson of Longfleet Hall. 'Longfirm' it ought to have been called, for it was all kept up by other people's money—a gigantic fraud, that's what it was! No wonder they could cut a dash, and live

magnificently, and surround themselves with costly luxuries, and dress like the nobility of the land, and snub their country neighbours—it is easy to spend munificently when you can help yourself out of the coffers of the public! '*Me judice*,' that Henderson was rightly punished. He was transported for seven years, and perhaps he will learn the difference between '*meum et tuum*' during his expatriation."

"But, my dear Mrs. Zillner, you have not told me about the Burgeses."

The Squire had I know not how many shares in Henderson's bank, and, when the crash came, and dozens of Brixleigh families found they had been deceived and ruined, poor Squire Burges took it sadly to heart. The news fell on him like a blow, and crushed him to the earth, as it were. He had done the best he could to make a good provision for his family, as he thought, and when he saw nothing but ruin and poverty before them, his heart broke, or, in other words, a stroke of paralysis came on, and he was dead in a week."

Tears had sprung to Cora's eyes as she thought of the kind, simple-hearted Squire whose last days were so sadly shadowed over.

"There, what a monster I am! making you cry, Cora, and I am sure you have had troubles enough of your own to exhaust the very fountain of tears."

"Are the Burgeses still living at Marleigh Grange?" Cora faltered.

"No, my dear. When those odious 'calls' for money came on them, large sums, you know, for which the poor Squire had made himself responsible

by being shareholder in an unlimited bank—when those calls came on them, one after another, they found themselves ruined, drained to the last fraction. The furniture was sold, and the fine old Grange and the family estate, that had been in the family for generations, would have been sold also, had it been possible. But as it could not be brought to the hammer, it was mortgaged almost to its full value."

"Where is Mrs. Burges now?"

"Living in London, my dear. Ralph has taken lodgings for his mother and Nesta near his office, so that they may not be separated. Ralph has put his shoulders manfully to the wheel, has risen to the necessities of the case, one may say, for he has taken a clerkship in a merchant's office, and works as though he had been a clerk all his days, and never had any higher prospects. Thomas McArthur—brother to the curate of Marleigh, you know—is the merchant with whom he is employed. Perhaps you will wonder how I know all these details, but Nesta writes to me often, poor child! and tells me all the news. I think it is a relief to her mind, and she feels she has my sympathy."

The conversation came to an end, for Mrs. Woodhouse and Herr Zillner arrived at the minute. The latter had been despatched to the "Ladies' College" with news of Cora's arrival, and with a pressing invitation to Mrs. Woodhouse to join them at dinner. She had been delighted at the chance of seeing her old pupil again, and had come over at once.

The dinner was served on antique pottery, or rather on what looked like "antique," for the ware

was of modern make, and on it the most marvellous "old world" designs displayed themselves. Bunches of flowers bloomed forth from odd-fashioned red-clay jars, on which were painted, in black, strange birds pecking at cherries.

But whether the table is spread "after the antique" or in the modern style does not so much matter after all if the "dinner of herbs" has love for its sauce, and a true welcome for its garnishing, as was the case at Mrs. Zillner's repast on this particular evening.

Cora's bedroom was fitted up strictly after some epoch of the "Middle Ages." The massive bedstead had a top like a huge "catafalque," and it had a painted tile inserted in the footboard. The washstand was adorned with an ornamental tile to match, so was the oak cabinet; and on the walls were paintings—mostly on dead-gold grounds—that must certainly have been copied from the title-page of some illuminated volume, given to the world before perspective, and outline, and "chiaro-oscuro" had been very much studied.

But with all these adornments, Cora's chamber was not strictly a chamber of "soft repose" on this night. She could not sleep, but tossed restlessly on her pillow—her mind full of conflicting thoughts, her heart sad for her dearest friends—the exiles from Marleigh Grange—on whom such deep troubles had fallen!

Of course, Ralph Burges had come out of the "fire of sorrow" *manfully*—he was just the one to rise above crushing circumstances, just the one, whatever

happene¹, to follow the precept, " Let thine eyes look right on, and let thine eyelids look straight before thee."

How bright life at the Grange had been when Cora was staying there, not so very long ago ! how suddenly that brightness had all been covered up with dense, dark clouds ! It all seemed so mysterious, and Cora lay thinking, fretting, and wondering, until the pale grey light of morning fell dimly on the paintings on the walls.

Then she rose, and dressed herself quickly, for she was to start for London by an early train.

Mrs. Zillner had not gone to the " Ladies' College " on that morning. She had remained at home in compliment to Cora, to help her get ready for her journey and to see her off.

But, of course, Winifred had been up hours ago, and had enjoyed her cold bath and taken her breakfast. She was now seated in the breakfast-room, waiting, a pile of wools in a basket beside her, and in her fingers a large piece of coarse towelling, on which she was embroidering a pretty cluster of lilies, tulips, and roses in soft shades of crewels. It was a table-cover for afternoon tea, or kettledrum, she said.

Cora had stopped first at Westville on her return from the Continent. It lay *en route* for London, so she had deposited her extra luggage and surplus boxes at Mrs. Zillner's house, with the expectation of returning there ere very long.

But what length of time Mr. Elder would require her to stay in town while he was settling her business was quite uncertain at present.

Perhaps there was a spice of her father's reticence of character in his daughter, or perhaps she did not feel justified in relating particulars while her affairs were unfinished, but, at any rate, she never once mentioned a word about the large fortune of which she was heiress.

"Where are you going to stay in London?" asked Mrs. Zillner, as she was pouring out some tea for Cora into a dark-blue cup edged with gold.

"I shall first go and see Mrs. Burges, and then I hardly know what my plans may be. I believe I must trust to Mr. Elder, my father's solicitor, or to Mrs. Burges to advise me."

"Then you hardly know when you will return here again?"

"Indeed I do not, Mrs. Zillner; but I will write and tell you all particulars."

An hour after this Cora was travelling on to London, with her furs wrapped closely around her, and a hot-water tin under her feet. The country through which the train passed was covered with snow, and soft, silent showers of snow were still falling at intervals.

She thought her journey would have been a wretched one, and was surprised to find she could still take pleasure in watching the glimpses of her native country revealed as the express rapidly dashed on its way.

The fields, the parks, the church steeples, the pretty homely villages, and the great towns were all delightful to her, who had so long been accustomed to foreign scenes.

With the easily-recovered elasticity of youth, she dwelt not so much on her own sorrows and on the sorrows of her friends as she did on the expected pleasure of soon seeing them again, and she was ready almost to blame herself for the feeling of joy that throbbed at her heart as she drew near her journey's end.

All unexpected and unlooked-for, and with fluttering pulses, Cora stood at the door of Mrs Burges's second-floor room, and heard herself announced by the little slip-shod maid who waited on all the lodgers in the house. The apartment was in half-shadow, lighted only by the fire in the grate, for the gas was not yet turned on.

Mrs. Burges was seated on a sofa drawn near the fire, Nesta, with her eyes closed, reclined on a chair on the other side of the fender, and between them stood a round table on which were a tea-tray, cups and saucers, and a steaming tea-pot. It was a moment of quiet before the meal, a moment of waiting for Ralph, who had not yet come in from his office.

At the sound of her friend's name, Nesta started from her chair, and was presently sobbing on Cora's neck.

"Nesta, my love! compose yourself. This is a poor welcome for our dear Cora," reproved Mrs. Burges, mildly, as she stood beside the girls, her own eyes full of tears. Their mutual sorrows were so fresh, so poignant, that full recollections seemed to crowd into that first greeting, and for a time grief had the ascendancy.



" 'I HAVE COME TO ASK IF YOU WILL LET ME STAY WITH YOU?'"

Cora presently slid down on a little stool at Mrs. Burges's feet, and looked up into her face, a position she had often assumed when she had a favour to request in those old days at Marleigh Grange.

"I have come to ask if you will let me stay with you?"

"Of course you must, Cora. You remember our compact in days gone by? You have always a home with us while we have a roof over our heads."

"Thank you, dear Mrs. Burges."

"I will not apologise for the meanness of our present abode, for you know the circumstances that drove us here as well as we do ourselves. If you will share our lot we shall be delighted."

"Indeed, indeed we shall, Cora!" exclaimed Nesta, warmly. "And now this weighty point is settled, and you are one of ourselves, come upstairs and take off your wraps; Ralph will be back directly."

Nesta led the way up two more flights of stairs, and threw open a door.

"This is my room—a funny little place, isn't it, Cora? Very near the stars and sparrows. The carpet, perhaps, has shrunk from the floor, for it leaves many planks uncovered; the bed is hard, the bedstead creaks, and the looking-glass has a crack across the middle. But you don't mind all that—do you, dear?"

"Of course not, Nesta," said Cora, unfastening her hat.

"You must share my room to-night, and to-morrow we shall be able to give you a room to yourself, for I know Mrs. Nugent has one to spare. A

lodger of hers went away yesterday. Cora, what a change for us, isn't it? But I won't allow anyone to blame poor papa, or to cast reflections on him! All he did he thought was for our good—the dear, trustful, unsuspecting, confiding darling!"

Nesta turned away to dash the hot, swelling tears from her eyes.

"I felt perfectly indignant when Mrs. Zillner told me of Mr. Henderson's unprincipled conduct," exclaimed Cora.

"Mousie! I wouldn't have that man's conscience, no, not for millions and millions of money! Numbers of families are even worse off than we are—are crushed down utterly, with no chance of a rebound to anything like comfort. We must not be unthankful; many mercies are still left to us, and we are all three only just finding out what we can do in the world. Ralph works like a galley-slave in Mr. McArthur's office. Wasn't it kind of Charles to get his brother to come forward and offer poor Ralph employment just when we were at our wits' ends to know what steps to take?"

"One would naturally expect kindness from the Rev. Charles McArthur," replied Cora, with a smile, that somehow brought a quick flush to Nesta's cheeks.

"Yes, yes, of course! I am working like galley-slave number two, for I am giving daily tuition to the four small daughters of a retired linendraper. He doesn't pay me very highly, by the bye, for you know I am inexperienced, and, sometimes, a little impatient. Oh, Cora! don't I get into an

'awful wax' when I see the fat, dumpy digits of that eldest daughter of the linendraper striking false chords on the piano! It is my firm belief that girl will never play a tune!"

There was still a spice of the old Nesta left after all! She looked more womanly than of yore. The wild-rose tint was gone from her cheeks. Her blue eyes were more thoughtful, her sunny curls were all bound into a knot at the back of her well-poised head, and her figure, once so plump and round, was now slim and tall.

She talked on while Cora was brushing off the dust of travel and smoothing her soft brown hair.

"We all are become busy as bees," she added, with a little laugh; "even 'the mother' is working something for the general good—a tiny muslin dress, that she intends for Madame De Ligne's shop, where the work of reduced ladies is sold. You are ready, I see, so we will go down, for I daresay Ralph has arrived."

Ralph had arrived. He met Cora just outside the second-floor room door, and held her hand in a long pressure as he looked into her soft eyes, trying to read all she had to tell him of love and constancy.

"I am glad you are come, dear Cora!" he whispered, and they all went into the room together.

Mrs. Burges had not been unmindful of Cora's need of refreshment after her journey, and had ordered something substantial in the shape of cold meat and boiled eggs.

It was a cosy meal, as they gathered beside the

round table near the fire, for though there was so much sadness underlying all their thoughts, it was not allowed to appear on the surface.

There was some pleasant news to relate, and Nesta took on herself the chief task of the narration.

"Olive is delighted with India," she said, "and only think, Cora, she wants me so much to go out to her. Says I am silly to bury myself in obscurity, and that lots of balls and parties are for ever going on, and that I should be in the midst of gaiety. As if I cared a rush for that kind of thing, or even if I did, as if I should ever dream of leaving 'the mother!'"

The next news was about Fred, who was at Gibraltar with the regiment, and liked the station very much.

"He used to mention you all in his letters until very lately, Cora; but now there is Captain Leyburne's daughter—a certain young lady called Ruby, who has almond-shaped eyes, a pure creamy complexion, and—"

"Now that is too bad of you, Nesta," interrupted Ralph, with a laugh.

"Never mind, I'll read you the letter in private, Cora."

"Poor, dear Fred!" said Mrs. Burges, with a sigh.

Cora during that evening observed how much Mrs. Burges had altered for the worse. Though gentle and kind as ever, there was a look of deep sadness in her pale face it never used to wear. She tried to

enter into conversation, to feel an interest in all they were saying; but she soon leaned back on her cushion, weak and worn out.

"You must go to bed now, dearest mother," said watchful Nesta, and presently led her away on her arm.

Ralph instantly went towards Cora, and seated himself by her side.

"Cora! I cannot tell you what happiness it is to see you," he said, softly.

She looked up to him with quivering lips.

"Dear papa often spoke of you, Ralph; he was very sorry about some things he once said."

"Those 'things' are all forgotten now, Cora. I remember him only as a kind friend whose loss I mourn. Dearest, do you recollect the promise I made, that I consider myself yours, yours only, until you set me free?"

"Do you wish your freedom now, Ralph?" she asked, smiling.

"A thousand times no! Cora, I have never changed towards you—never shall, however long I may have to wait ere I can ask you to become my wife."

He went over to a desk, unlocked it, and drew out a small paper packet, which he opened.

"Here are some things I preserved amidst the wreck and ruin of Marleigh Grange."

Cora examined the contents, and saw the small picture she had painted on Westville sands and given to Nesta—a yacht becalmed on a summer sea, and some Provence rosebuds that had once been dipped in the waters of Gastein.

Cora smiled as she looked at the latter, for she remembered she had a rosebud to match that had also been dipped in the stream, and was now cherished amongst her treasures.

"Trifles ! silly fancies !" cries someone.

Perhaps *you* think so, Mr. Universal Sneerer, who would fain laugh down all that is tender, noble, or high with your modern spirit of ridicule, who would fain parody or burlesque the genuine emotions of the heart—the love that makes the poetry of a good life. But remember, noble natures are the most tender; the strong man is the true man !

Poor dumb relics of withered flowers ! letters in faded writing ! portraits with colourless cheeks and garments of ancient fashion ! locks of sunny or raven hair ! All valueless to others, you have yet a language that speaks to some heart, and has brought tears to some old, world-weary eyes when you have suddenly told of scenes long since past, of loved ones long since dead !

And so Ralph and Cora talked over their past, and more fondly than ever went over the old love story, that through all the trials of absence and sorrow held yet no page of distrust or doubt.

They had been close together in heart, though distance had separated and circumstances had kept them asunder.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

CORA was standing near Mrs. Burges's sofa the next morning, dressed in crapes and sables, waiting for a cab to take her to Mr. Elder's office. The little slipshod Laura, from the kitchen, had been despatched down the street for the cab, and had not yet returned.

Mrs. Burges, in her widow's cap, with her slightly-silvered hair, her delicate fingers handling her dainty needlework, and her refined, sad face looked, in that shabby room (the meanness and shortcomings of which were so visible in the wintry sunlight), like an exquisite picture set in a very inferior frame.

Cora was silent for a few minutes, then looked towards Mrs. Burges with eyes misty from unshed tears.

"I feel an arrant coward this morning! Oh, how I wish this day was over!"

"But why, my dear Cora? What distresses you so much?"

"I dread the interview with Mr. Elder. He is an utter stranger to me, and talking over my dear father's affairs will be like bringing up the past again most painfully."

"Of course it will, my dear. Would it be any help to have Ralph with you?"

"Oh, yes! but I did not like to propose it. He went to his office two hours ago. Nesta and he left at the same time."

Mrs. Burges thought for a moment.

"I will write and ask Ralph to accompany you. He will say candidly whether he can do so or not."

She scribbled off a few lines, enclosed them in an envelope, and sent them to Mr. McArthur's office by Laura.

The answer came in the shape of Ralph himself.

"Why did you not tell me of your trepidation, Cora?" he whispered.

"I thought you could not stay from the office."

"Mr. McArthur is not such a hard taskmaster as to refuse me a few hours."

Cora felt it a "help" to have Ralph beside her as the shrewd, keen-eyed man of business went through the interrogations and necessary formula. It was a "help" to see his kind face near as she faltered out replies and signed papers, striving hard to keep back her tears when her father's name was brought forward in the conversation.

Mr. Elder's reception of Ralph Burges had been rather marked. He requested an introduction, with the words, blandly spoken—

"Your relative, I presume, Miss Forest?"

"Oh, no ; Mr. Burges and I are not related," was her reply, as a sudden blush mantled her cheeks.

"Not even cousins?"

"We are not related at all," she answered promptly, as the blush deepened.

Mr. Elder took quick notice of all this, and gazed at Ralph with a shrewd half-smile, that said as plainly as looks could say—

"Ah, ah ! no relative ! Doubtless, then, a lover, who has already found out poor Dugald Forest's daughter has a fine 'dot' for her portion."

Ralph noticed this meaning look of the "business" man, but did not understand its import until the fact of Cora's large inheritance was revealed to him. Then, as he heard the thousands after thousands enumerated and reckoned up, his heart sank within him—the larger the sum she possessed the wider the barrier that had arisen up between them. He felt as if she was already drifting away—drifting and leaving him stranded on a barren shore.

As he sat opposite Cora in the cab on their way home his hat was drawn over his forehead, and he looked pale and troubled as he bent his dark eyes wistfully on her sweet face and drooping head. Never had she been so dear to him as at the very moment he was telling himself he must give her up. A bitter struggle was going on in his mind, that made him silent and wretched.

"I must release her from her promise. Cora must be free—free to love and marry whom she chooses," he pondered. "Never could I claim her as my wife now—I, so poor, so wrecked in fortune; she, a

wealthy heiress, who might have rank and wealth to match her own at her feet. No wonder that sneering lawyer scoffed at me—everybody would scoff and say I took advantage of her ignorance of the world to win her to myself should I ever marry her."

"Ralph, you look really ill," said Cora, in a feeling tone, as he helped her out of the cab at their own door.

"No, darling, not ill, but intolerably wretched," replied he, as he held her hand clasped in both of his for a moment; "Cora, whatever happens, I cannot love you less. Nothing can diminish my affection for you," he said, abruptly turning away.

That evening, when Cora came downstairs to tea, she found Mrs. Burges and Nesta with their heads close together, talking earnestly. The rays of the firelight fell full on their faces, and she saw they both looked disturbed. Mrs. Burges had tears in her mild eyes. They did not attempt to explain what their subject of conversation had been, but Nesta lit the gas, and began pouring out the tea.

"Where is Ralph?" asked Cora, when she saw there was no cup laid for him.

"He has finished his tea, and gone to the office; he talked of arrears of work, and of having to make up for lost time."

There certainly was a difference in the manner of both Nesta and her mother. Cora detected a something she could not define, but that nevertheless she felt, and at which she much wondered.

Mrs. Burges's eyes and tone of voice were full of a tender regretfulness. Nesta was reticent, grave,

thoughtful, but still very kind, bestowing on Cora a dozen little attentions, that she might perhaps have given her had she been going away on some long, dreary journey.

By-and-by Mrs. Burges went upstairs to bed, Nesta, as usual, in attendance. And, soon afterwards, Ralph came into the room, looking worn and haggard.

"I have come to release you from your promise, Cora," began he, impetuously, and with a husky voice.

"My promise! Why? What have I done?" she asked, in alarm.

"You have done nothing, my darling! But circumstances divide us for ever. I dare not bind you to my poverty and broken fortunes. You will go out into the world, and meet with others more suitable to you."

She made no reply, and Ralph went on in an agitated way—

"It is kindness, tender kindness, on my part to break off our engagement, Cora. Look on me as a true brother—one who will love you, and pray for you, and think of you always."

Cora turned on him quickly, a spice of her father's spirit flashing from her eyes.

"What a despicable, narrow-minded, mean, intolerable girl you must think me, Ralph! You gave me your love and trust when you believed I was penniless, and now you find that God has given me riches far more than I desired or deserved, you would fain send me forth to the world

— a prey to fortune-hunters — as you pleasantly hint."

Her eloquence came to an abrupt close, for hot scalding tears rushed into her eyes, and sobs half-choked her.

"I do but give you your *choice*, Cora," he exclaimed, roused very considerably by the reproachful words she had flung at him broadcast in her indignation.

"Then I take my choice!"

"Which shall it be, darling?"

But her little bit of pride had vanished, her storm of indignation had died out, and she was sobbing pitifully.

"Oh, Ralph! how could you be so cruel?"

The next moment she was rapturously clasped in his arms, all doubts, all scruples, all hesitation over for ever.

Mrs. Burges was rejoiced that it ended thus, and she told Cora so the next day.

"My dear, both Nesta and I blamed Ralph, and thought there was too much pride on his part, but then he is so scrupulous, so upright, so high-principled, he shrank from the very idea of taking advantage of your engagement to him. After all, we understood you better than he did, for we knew you would not be influenced by mere worldliness. Cora, I do not pretend to despise riches; our recent losses have taught me what power they have, what responsibility they bring, but what do they avail after all? There will come a time to each of us when it will not be asked what fortune we have, but the question

will be what portion we have made ours of the 'hidden riches' which God has promised to those who seek in faith, as all those do whose hearts are led by the Holy Spirit."

* * * * *

When Cora's business in London was completed, she returned to her mediæval rooms at Mrs. Zillner's, and late in the year, when the golden corn was waving in the harvest fields, a quiet wedding took place in Westville old church.

Cora and Ralph were married. Nesta was the only bridesmaid, and Mrs. Woodhouse gave the bride away.

After the honeymoon, the wedded pair returned to Marleigh Grange, for the first use Cora made of her fortune had been to pay off the mortgage on the estate and to have the house beautified and refurnished.

Mrs. Burges was there in her old room—in her old place—waiting to receive her son and daughter; and Nesta—now betrothed to Charles McArthur—was there also.

And thus we bid Cora adieu, as, bright and happy, she stands by her husband's side on the threshold of the old house that is yet to be a new home to them—a home of happiness and peace.

THE END.



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